

Tortured Fragments of History

Veil of secrecy surrounding methods of interrogation and torture

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In April 2004, the world was momentarily shocked by televised photographs from Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison showing hooded Iraqis stripped naked, posed in contorted positions, and visibly suffering humiliating abuse while amused American soldiers stood by. Responsibility for these acts of psychological torture has largely been confined to the lowest ranks and kept close to Abu Ghraib itself. Official statements attributed the practice to a temporary breakdown in "military discipline", thus diverting any suspicion that the evidence of psychological torture as paraded before our eyes in the Abu Ghraib snapshots is most likely the product of intelligence policies shaped in design and application over a long period of time.

The Abu Ghraib scandal did, however, open a floodgate of news and information leaks about the existence of a mini-gulag of prisons the CIA and US Army Intelligence had set up in Afghanistan, on aircraft carriers, in remote places like the Indian Ocean Island of Diego Garcia, and in the prisons of torture-friendly allies.(1) An official inquiry disclosed that the US Army specifically allowed the CIA to house "ghost detainees" who were unidentified and unaccounted for in Abu Ghraib, thus encouraging violations of reporting and monitoring requirements under the Geneva Conventions.(2)

What the official inquiry studiously avoided telling us were the actual reasons why such obsessive secrecy was deemed necessary in the first place. But clearly, such facilities are placed outside the rule of law. They are not subject to review of the manner in which they function, the interrogation methods used, and the general conditions prevailing there. Representatives of the International Red Cross, are denied access to the facilities; nobody knows how many detainees are held there, who the detainees are, where they come from, which authority was responsible for their capture or arrest, who conducted the interrogations, or whether the interrogators were authorised to do so.

It is reasonable to assume that, once a prisoner of war is captured, the captor's immediate objective would be to obtain from the prisoner quick information for tactical operations such as strikes, counter-strikes or further arrests. The infliction of physical pain is probably the quickest method of obtaining information, the usefulness of which is usually short-lived due to the changing and changeable nature of battlefield conditions. So why then the purpose of protracted psychological torture, which is comparatively slower at producing results and seemingly more benign than physical methods?

The obsessive veil of secrecy surrounding such methods means that military personnel are themselves largely unaware of how their individual actions fit into the overall picture. Others know exactly what they are doing, but keep quiet because they also know that what they are doing is criminal. The Official Secrets Act also ensures that lips remain tightly sealed.

Above all, a perceived need to protect “the national interest” combines with censorship to retain a wall of silence around the subject.

A notable exception occurred, however, several years ago during the mammoth trial in South Africa of alleged war criminal Brigadier Wouter Basson, a South African Army chemical and biological warfare specialist.(3) The trial provided rare glimpses into the horrors that can and did evidently occur in circumstances of extreme secrecy and geographical isolation no less pervasive and extreme as those prevailing currently in America’s gulag of secret prisons.

Evidence presented at Basson’s trial lifted the lid on some bizarre events taking place in the 1970s and 1980s at an airfield and forward military base named Fort Rev, situated at Ondangwa in the former South West Africa, (now Namibia). Fort Rev was used by 5 Reconnaissance Regiment and the other special forces regiments as an operational base for launching counter-insurgency operations into Angola and areas of Owamboland. Inside the base, immediately adjacent to the airfield, was a secret torture and interrogation centre where attempts, not always successful, were made to “turn” or “convert” captured guerrillas into so-named “pseudo operators” for deployment in highly sensitive, covert deception operations. Hence the name Fort Rev, meaning “reversal”. Neurophysiologists and behavioural scientists have another phrase for it: transmarginal inhibition or TMI — a state of behavioral collapse induced by physical and emotional stress prior to inducing new patterns of actions and beliefs. Successful application of this technique, sometimes referred to pejoratively as “brain washing”, requires psychological torturers to have total control of the environment. Existing mental programming can then be replaced with new patterns of thinking and behavior. The same results can be obtained in contemporary psychiatric treatment by electric shock treatments and even by purposely lowering a patient’s blood sugar level with insulin injections. (4)

The Namibian deception operations, under the tutelage of battle hardened former Rhodesian special forces operators, had to be kept secret at any cost. If the operations were successful, pseudo gangs consisting of turned guerrillas posing as genuine freedom fighters would be infiltrated back into the field of operations where they would in turn capture more insurgents. Some of these so-called “high value targets”, would then also be turned at Fort Rev, others being useful only as a source of information. But, having served that purpose, or having resisted turning, they then presented a major security risk, because they would have picked up at least some insight into the manner and methods of pseudo operations, and this could immediately compromise the secrecy of the entire pseudo operations programme. So they could not be processed through normal channels and imprisoned in a central holding facility from which word might leak to the outside world.

The torturers and interrogators at Fort Rev got around this small problem by simply killing off survivors of interrogation. “Redundant” prisoners were disposed of without trace after being drugged and their bodies dumped into the Atlantic Ocean from an aircraft. The doomed prisoners, before being loaded onto an aircraft and dumped 100 miles out to sea, were first injected with powerful muscle relaxants which had the effect of paralysing the victim whilst leaving his mind fully conscious. An anaesthetic drug was also used, having the effect of causing hallucinations. (5)

The practise of dropping prisoners’ bodies from aircraft, according to evidence presented at the trial of Brigadier Basson, was developed in the late 1970s during joint operations between Rhodesian and South African special forces. One witness, a former French Foreign

Legionnaire and member of the Rhodesian counter-insurgency unit known as the Selous Scouts, also described how Basson allegedly injected captured freedom fighters with poison during a flight over Mozambique territory. He said these captives were then thrown alive from an airplane in 1979. The victims were five guerrillas believed to have been from the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA). According to the witness, who could not be named for reasons of personal safety, said that before the poisoned, unconscious men were thrown from the plane, they were dressed in camouflage uniforms and supplied with guns and false papers. They were then sprinkled with an unknown powdery substance, which he believed was poison or some kind of lethal chemical agent. He believed the powdery agent was meant to contaminate other freedom fighters or sympathisers who might happen upon the bodies.

The *modus operandi* of the Selous Scouts was exemplified in a separate incident in February 1980, when political campaigning was approaching a climax in Zimbabwe-Rhodesia's first free election. Several churches became the targets of terrorist bombs. A well-orchestrated Press campaign swiftly attributed the bombings to "communist atheists" — an apparent reference to the national liberation movement. Then, in what turned out to be the last in a series of explosions, somebody blew himself up when the bomb he was planting exploded prematurely. Papers found on his body identified him as a highly decorated member of the Selous Scouts. The Rhodesians are also suspected to have used pseudo operators to murder more than 30 missionaries in remote districts, where many freedom fighters had been educated at mission stations. The murders were attributed falsely to the liberation movement. But Catholic Bishop Donald Lamont, before he was imprisoned for a year, stripped of his Rhodesian citizenship and finally expelled from the country, had no doubts about who was really responsible for the killings. "If it were the objective of the guerrillas to kill missionaries, there would not be one of us left alive."(6)

The Rhodesians had extensive experience in counter-insurgency doctrine dating back to 1956 when British Commonwealth forces in Malaya had included the Rhodesian African Rifles, and the Rhodesians had also modelled their "pseudo gangs" along the lines of the British counter-insurgency strategy during the 1950s Mau Mau uprising in Kenya. The Americans, for their part, later adapted their own version of this doctrine in Vietnam.(7)

Such methods bore a striking resemblance to the ideas of the Organisation de l'Armee Secrete (OAS) which operated in Algeria during the late 1950s. The OAS was made up of embittered right-wing French army officers and fanatical Algerians of European descent trying to retain Algeria under French colonial control. In their ranks were covert action specialists working for the French army's 5th (Psychological Action) Bureau, and officers commanding French Foreign Legion and paratroop units in Algeria. Communist guerrilla warfare, according to them, did not have the objective of capturing strategic territory as in conventional warfare, but created an extended military battlefield that included all aspects of civil society, especially the psychological and ideological spheres. Having "identified" the enemy's techniques, the proponents of "counter-terrorism" then sought to neutralise the enemy by adopting the enemy's "own" methods and turning them against the enemy. Hence the coming into being of a ruthless and sophisticated ensemble of psychological techniques. The objective was to create a climate of tension, anxiety and insecurity, thereby conditioning the masses to accept State authority while alienating the masses from the Algerian liberation movement.(8)

The collapse of the OAS came about after a failed 1958 military revolt in Algiers and a

“general’s putsch” in April 1961 which brought down the French government and threatened the political survival of its Gaullist successor, the Fifth Republic. Having failed to secure the “moral regeneration” of France many of its members were forced to flee abroad, notably to Argentina and also to Portugal where Lisbon became their strategic centre with official encouragement from the Portuguese secret police. In exchange for asylum and other incentives, they helped train foreign counter-insurgency and parallel police units forming the embryo of future “counter-terrorist” groups deployed around the world under the tutelage of OAS fugitives. (9)

By 1984 one French veteran of Indo-China and many African campaigns, the notorious Bob Denard, virtually controlled the Comoros islands together with a band of French mercenaries. The Comoros rapidly became a secret staging post funnelling arms from South Africa to the rebel Renamo movement in Mozambique. Denard also made it possible for South Africa to build and operate a sophisticated electronic eavesdropping facility at Itsandra on Grande Comore island. From here Pretoria could monitor both maritime movements in the Mozambique Channel and ANC radio communications in neighbouring Tanzania. (10)

From Lisbon former OAS members plotted to destabilise and destroy national liberation movements throughout Africa and their exploits galvanised rightwing extremists everywhere. An internal report written by one former OAS member was captured in the mid-1970s by leftist officers of the Armed Forces Movement in Lisbon. The captured document, shown to journalists, endorsed bluntly a “strategy of tension” that would “work on public opinion and promote chaos in order to later raise up a defender of the citizens against the disintegration provoked by subversion and terrorism”. As one seasoned cold warrior put it: “When you’ve got the masses by the balls, their hearts and minds follow.”

In 1994, such ideas found resonance in the run-up to South Africa’s first democratic elections. The former apartheid regime — then part of a transitional government — made much of wooing black voters on a platform proclaiming “black leaders have failed to halt the continuing violence”, which was blamed by white politicians on “warring black factions”. The gunmen involved in many of the violent clashes taking place at the time, used Soviet-made AK-47 rifles and Makarov pistols to create the impression that liberation movement “terrorists” were responsible, and police reports always blamed the ANC.

As amnesty applicants would later confess to the South African Truth Commission, the SA Police diverted taxpayers’ money to a police-run strategic deception unit called Stratcom. Former Stratcom unit head Vic McPherson disclosed to the Truth Commission that more than 40 undercover police agents, paid informers, unwitting “sources” and “friendly” journalists throughout the South African mainstream media had participated in Stratcom projects during the late 1980s. According to former security police death-squad commander Colonel Eugene de Kock, presently serving a life sentence for multiple murders, his activities in Stratcom during the 1980s included violent attacks on white people by “turned” freedom fighters, which were then falsely attributed by elements of the Press to left-wing activists. The intention was to manipulate South African public opinion to accept that only elements of the former regime, if reinstated, could defend the masses from chaos, anarchy and terrorism.(11)

In the absence of digital imaging technology of the kind evidenced at Abu Ghariieb, one can only speculate about the full extent to which brainwashing or the “turning” of prisoners was practised for many years in South Africa, or during France’s battle for Algiers in the 1950s,

Britain's suppression of independence movements in Kenya and Malaya in the 1960s, Argentina's dirty war, Britain's Northern Ireland conflict in the 1970 and 1980s, and countless other regional conflicts. Whatever happened then, and whatever the true activities currently taking place in America's gulag of secret prisons, it is certainly the case that extreme secrecy provides an ideal environment for the application of psychological torture techniques aimed at "converting" prisoners of war into pseudo operators.

There remains wide public ignorance and a studied avoidance of this unsettling subject. Few people have been able to fit together the fragments of history and grasp the larger picture. Others simply don't want to know. The practice of psychological torture, never fully acknowledged, is thus allowed to persist inside the secret services as the product of intelligence strategies that have probably been standard practice for at least half-a-century or more. Abu Ghraib may be just the tip of an iceberg.

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NOTES & REFERENCES:

(1) For a list of US detention sites see http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/media/2004_alerts/0617.htm

(2) For many years the Israeli secret services took this one step further by actually operating a "ghost prison" for political detainees. Code-named Facility 1391, this secret prison intended for "special cases" operated in Israel for many years within the walls of a secret army base, distant from the eyes of the Press and the public, and without being declared a detention facility, as required by statute. See <http://www.icj-sweden.org/Facility1391.pdf>

(3) The complete trial record of Wouter Basson is available at http://ccrweb.ccr.uct.ac.za/archive/cbw/cbw_index.html

All charges against Basson were eventually withdrawn by the State after a marathon 30-month trial in the Pretoria High Court three years ago. The court ruled that it had no jurisdiction in respect of crimes committed in South West Africa — or Namibia as it is now named. An appeal court later overturned the decision on the basis that South West Africa was in fact a South African colony during the apartheid era. It was illegally occupied and administered by the former South African regime. The Directorate of Public Prosecutions then decided last year not to reopen the case against of Basson because of the legal principle of double jeopardy, which means in effect that an alleged perpetrator cannot be tried twice on the same charges. For subsequent developments see Stan Winer essay at <http://www.coldtype.net/Assets.06/Essays.06/0506.Reader5.pdf>

(4) The technique was discovered by Russian scientist Ivan Pavlov (see bibliography below) who identified TMI in the early 1900's. His work with animals is said to have opened the door to further investigations with humans. The ways to achieve conversion through TMI are many and varied, but the usual first step in brainwashing is to work on the emotions of an individual or group until they reach an abnormal level of anger, fear, excitement or nervous tension. The progressive result of this mental condition is to impair judgement and increase suggestibility. The more this condition can be maintained or intensified, the more it

compounds, leading to total behavioural conversion.

(5) Basson trial record

(6) David Martin & Phyllis Johnson, *The Struggle for Zimbabwe*, London: Faber 1981, p.283 (Martin and Johnson)

(7) On Rhodesian pseudo-gangs see: Martin & Johnson, op cit, pp.110-11; Ken Flower, *Serving Secretly: An intelligence chief on record*, London: John Murray 1987, pp.114-5. On the Rhodesians in Malaya see Christopher Owen, *The Rhodesian African Rifles*, London: Leo Cooper, 1970. On the origin of "pseudo gangs" in Kenya see Frank Kitson, *Gangs and Counter-gangs*, London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1960. On British counter-insurgency doctrine generally see Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency and Peacekeeping*, London: Faber, 1971. On Vietnam see Larry Cable, *Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counter-Insurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War*, New York: New York University Press 1986, p.82

(8) Interviews conducted by the author with officers of the Armed Forces Movement (AFM) in Lisbon after the 1975 socialist military coup in Portugal. Many incriminating documents, viewed by the author, were seized by the AFM from OAS fugitives operating in Lisbon.

(9) Ibid.,

(10) See D Kendo, "Comores: L'Ordre Mercenaire", *Jeune Afrique*, nos 1511/1512, December 1989; Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), *Madagascar, Comoros, Country Profile*, 1989-90, London 1990, pp 32-36; EIU, *Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, Comoros: Country Report No. 1*, London 1990.

(11) The strategy was apparently revived three years ago when 22 seditious South African conspirators including three senior army officers who plotted to establish a rebel army of about 4 500 to overthrow the South African government and replace it with a military regime run entirely by white supremacists. The conspirators, currently on trial for murder, treason and terrorism, allegedly planned to unleash chaos in the country to cover the rebel army's movements while a 50-man death squad would eliminate "traitors" and blame the actions on black people. The rebel army, to "restore order", would then contrive a 10-day electricity blackout under cover of which airports would be closed, aircraft grounded, and arms depots and combat vehicles seized. A final stage would be the inauguration of a right-wing military government.

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