

U.S. POWs during the Korean War

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A July 2, 2008 New York Times article, “China Inspired Interrogations at Guantánamo,” reported that in 2002 military trainers at Guantánamo Bay based an interrogation class on a chart about torture techniques including “sleep deprivation,” “prolonged constraint,” and “exposure.” The article says this chart was copied from a 1957 Air Force study of Chinese Communist techniques used during the Korean War to obtain confessions from American prisoners and is “the latest and most vivid evidence of the way Communist interrogation methods that the United States long described as torture became the basis for interrogations both by the military at the base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and by the Central Intelligence Agency.”

The real truth is that historically, the United States has been NUMBER ONE when it comes to developing, refining, and exporting torture techniques—like electroshock and waterboarding that U.S. interrogators have used against suspected “terrorists.” Part 1 of this series ([Mad Scientists and Criminal Laboratories](#)) exposed how the CIA and the U.S. military conceived of, funded, and utilized inhumane experiments, using human guinea pigs, to develop torture techniques—such as shock treatment, sensory deprivation, and the use of hallucinogenic drugs. Part 2 ([The U.S. Roots of Waterboarding](#)) discussed how, at the turn of the 20th century—before the existence of any communist government—the U.S. routinely carried out what is now called waterboarding, in the Philippines.

*This article is Part III of a three part series entitled: **Torture Techniques at Guantánamo: “Communist Inspired” ...or Developed, Refined, and Exported by the USA?***

Part III looks at the actual policies and conduct of Maoist China towards U.S. POWs during the Korean War.

At the end of WW2, the Korean peninsula was divided into north and south by the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The U.S. imperialists saw the southern half of Korea and the puppet regime they installed there as a major element in their plans to contain and perhaps wage war against the Soviet Union. And then after the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, the U.S. saw the pro-U.S. government in South Korea as crucial to surrounding, containing, and threatening the spread of communism in Asia. The People’s Republic of China was only a year old when it was directly threatened by the United States with the outbreak of the Korean War.

For over 50 years, the U.S. has repeated the story that during the Korean War, American POWs were tortured by Chinese communists and forced to make “false confessions” about the U.S. using biological warfare. Two basic things need to be said about this:

First, there is a lot of credible evidence that the U.S. *did in fact use biological warfare* during

the Korean War.

And second, the truth about the actual policies and conduct of Maoist China towards U.S. POWs during the Korean War is utterly different than what has been propagated by the U.S. government, the mainstream media and standard histories: the approach of the Chinese communists towards POWs, far from being one of torture, so-called “brainwashing,” and inhumane treatment, was lenient and centered on political education.

U.S. Biological Warfare

During World War 2, after Japan invaded and occupied China, a covert branch of the Japanese Army called “Unit 731,” did experiments on POWs in China to study the potential for large-scale bacteriological warfare. As many as 270,000 *civilians* may have died due to these experiments.¹ So what was the U.S. response to this horrible crime against humanity?

The U.S. granted immunity to members of Unit 731 in exchange for their research data.

Canada had also been developing biological weapons, including anthrax, and the U.S. took over these experiments.² By the time the Korean War started in 1950, the U.S. had five anti-personnel agents and two anti-crop agents, tested in cluster-bombs. In 1952, the U.S. Air Force requisitioned 23,900 of these cluster-bombs. U.S. scientists were also experimenting with the use of flies, fleas, lice, mosquitoes and ticks, to spread germs. Between 1951 and 1953, during the Korean War, the U.S. spent \$345 million on research into biological warfare (about \$2.2 billion in current dollars).

Thirty-six American pilots captured in Korea and interrogated by the Chinese army confessed to being involved in U.S. operations using biological weapons. They said they dropped fleas infected with plague and turkey feathers coated with toxins. When these pilots came home after the war they were threatened with court-martial and recanted their confessions.

Many official documents about U.S. biological warfare during the Korean War have been destroyed and others are still classified. But after extensive research, two Canadian historians, Stephen Endicott and Edward Hagerman, concluded that while the U.S. did not wage prolonged biological attacks on North Korea, it carried out limited covert, more experimental attacks using biological warfare.³ In addition, the U.S. dropped phosphorus bombs and, in 1951, used a daily average of 70,000 gallons of napalm.

Chinese investigators issued 600 pages of documentary evidence about U.S. biological warfare in Korea. This included reports of sudden deaths from plague, anthrax and encephalitis (brain inflammation resulting from a viral infection), and eyewitness accounts of US aircraft dropping strange objects, including soybean stalks, feathers and cardboard packages containing live insects, rotten fish, decaying pork, frogs and rodents. Fleas from these airdrops tested positive for plague, which had not been reported in Korea since 1912. And insects, spiders and feathers were found to be carrying anthrax.

The U.S. vigorously denied all this and launched a propaganda campaign that included stories of POWs subjected to mind control drugs and secret interrogation techniques.⁴

The fact that American POWs had gone on camera and confessed to carrying out biological warfare, and that some had even denounced the United States, was of great concern to the U.S. government. The official explanation for public consumption was that the U.S. was not

carrying out biological warfare and so if U.S. soldiers were saying this, they must have been “brainwashed.”

This lie was not only used to cover up and dismiss confessions by captured U.S. military personnel that they were involved in germ warfare, it was also used to justify research into “mind control” by the CIA. In the immediate wake of World War 2, it would have been unacceptable and very Nazi-like for the United States to openly talk about wanting to use torture and interrogation techniques. So the stated goal of this research was to prepare U.S. soldiers for what they might encounter if they were captured.⁵ But the real practice of this, which has been widely documented, was to refine and further develop interrogation techniques and methods of torture to be used by the United States (see parts 1 and 2 of this series).

Treatment of American POWs

But the question remains: Even if the U.S. carried out biological warfare during the Korean War, this still would not justify inhumane treatment of POWs. So what about reports that the Chinese communists tortured American POWs?

According to U.S. officials, 7,245 Americans were captured or interned during the Korean War. Of these, 2,806 died in captivity, 4,418 were released to the U.S., and 21 refused repatriation and chose voluntarily to go live in the People’s Republic of China (more on this later).

After the Korean War extensive hearings were held before the U.S. Congress, headed by the infamous anti-communist liar, Joseph McCarthy. Dozens of American former POWs testified that they had been forced to march long distances, that guards spit in their faces, that they were sometimes beaten and suffered from lack of food and medical care. There were accounts of U.S. soldiers being captured and shot by Korean soldiers.⁶ Such treatment would constitute a violation of the Geneva Conventions (treaties formulated in Geneva, Switzerland that set the standards for international law for humanitarian concerns). With regard to the specific charge of torture during interrogation, no evidence was offered in these hearings to back the claim that Chinese communists used techniques like electroshock, water torture, or sensory deprivation.

The policies towards American POWs during the Korean War can be divided into three different phases: 1) July 1950 until November 1950, before Chinese Communist forces entered the war; 2) the winter of 1950-1951 when several temporary camps were created; and 3) the end of 1951 to the end of the war in June 1953, when there were eight permanent camps set up by the Chinese in North Korea.

At the start of the war, the North Korean army had no system for dealing with POWs and just had collection points. Then during the summer and fall of 1950, they moved the POWs on foot to temporary camps in the North and much of the testimony at the 1953 U.S. Senate Hearings were about these so-called “death marches.” When the Chinese communist forces entered the war after this, at the end of 1950, several thousand American soldiers and Marines were captured. Initially, the Chinese communists also did not have any system set up to deal with such large numbers of POWs and temporary POW camps were set up in the North. According to a fact sheet put out by the U.S. Department of Defense:

“POWs died in large numbers during the first year of the war. Lack of food, shelter and

medicine took its toll. During the first winter, some American POWs reported marching for days, sometimes in circles it seemed. Prisoners, weakened from battle, the cold and lack of food, who could not keep pace with their fellow prisoners were often left to die or executed by their captors. Prisoners carried and dragged one another through these marches. Some American POWs were young teenagers. One soldier captured during the Chosin Reservoir Campaign was 16 years old.

“Through most of 1951, despite established camps, casualties continued to mount. Prisoners were fed what North Korean peasants lived on and medical supplies were unavailable to the doctors.”

The death rate, which approached 40 percent, was a great concern to the Chinese and they quickly moved to change the situation. The U.S. fact sheet says, “Soon food and medical supplies were provided and conditions improved for the rest of the war.”

So even according to official accounts by the U.S. Department of Defense, it appears that most American POW casualties occurred during the relocation marches and in the temporary camps run by the North Korean army and that some of this can be attributed to lack of food and medical care which reflected the overall primitive and poor conditions of a country with little resources. The North Korean army and the Chinese communist forces were initially unprepared for the task of dealing with thousands of POWs. As in any war there were mistakes that were not good and should not have happened. This went against the Chinese army’s official policy with regard to POWs and they moved to correct them.

Re-education of POWs

Many books and articles have been written by and about Korean War American POWs, which attempt to make the case that the POW policy of the Chinese communists was one of brutality and inhumanity. The official policy of the North Korean army towards POWs isn’t clear. But what comes through in even many of these accounts is that the overall approach of the Chinese communists was one of leniency and political education.

For example, in the book *In Mortal Combat: Korea 1950-1953*, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian John Toland says:

“At the first mass meeting, a Chinese indoctrinator assured the prisoners that he was not angry at them for being in Korea. He realized the Americans and others had been duped by warmongers and Wall Street imperialists. He assured the men that Chairman Mao had given orders they should be treated with fairness. However, he warned, wrongdoers would be publicly criticized and forced to stand at attention for long periods. The barn in which they were indoctrinated was decorated with two Christmas trees, wreaths, candles, red paper bells and a sign: ‘Merry Christmas.’ There was also a large placard: ‘If it were not for the Wall Street Imperialists you would be home with your wives and families on this Christmas night’... The food would be a healthy combination of sorghum seed, bean curd, soya-bean flour, and cracked corn. For a Christmas treat, they were to receive rice, boiled fatty pork, candy and peanuts. Each day, said the indoctrinator, the prisoners would be marched to the barn for a communal lecture or informal political discussions. Squad leaders would be responsible for assigned topics on Marxist dialectical materialism.”⁷

Later, Toland discusses how the POWs went through the “Chinese indoctrination course, with lectures day after day.” He says: “The virtues of communism were expounded, even in

informal conversations. Religion was denounced as a capitalist device for controlling people's minds, yet prisoners were allowed to keep Bible and religious articles, and were even permitted to hold religious discussions and readings."

Bourgeois historians like Toland use the terms "Chinese indoctrinator" and "indoctrination" to describe what happened to the American POWs. These types of buzz words go along with all the anti-communist claims that this was "brainwashing" and "mind control." But in fact, what becomes clear in reading these accounts is that the Chinese communists were giving these POWs a political education that revealed the lies they had been told and brought them the TRUTH of things—that told them what U.S. imperialism was really about and how this war was not in their interests.

In another book, *Korea: The War Before Vietnam*, Callum A. MacDonald says that the Chinese policy toward POWs, which had been established during the Chinese revolution and the struggle against Japan, quickly and consistently replaced the "brutal and non-political measures" of the North Koreans. MacDonald goes on to say:

"The so-called 'lenient policy' treated POWs as victims of the ruling classes, students who were to be given food and medical treatment. They were to be neither robbed nor abused. Instead they were to be led towards an understanding of the true nature of the war and of their own societies. After such re-education, prisoners could either be released at the front to rejoin and demoralize their old units, or held for longer-term indoctrination."⁸

This evaluation of the Chinese policy toward POWs corroborates stories told by Chinese military generals who were in charge of Korean War POWs. In the book *Mao's Generals Remember Korea*⁹, Lieutenant General (Ret.) Du Ping says:

"As early as the Jinggangshan period [the early years of the Chinese revolution], Chairman Mao Zedong had made our army's policy toward prisoners of war one of lenient treatment. For many years, this policy had always been one of the most important elements in our army's political work. During the prolonged civil wars and the Anti-Japanese War, our POW policy was well known and appreciated by enemy forces. During our First Campaign in the Korean War, it was said that enemy troops were easily beaten but rarely captured. That meant the American and puppet soldiers apparently did not yet know our policy.

"The new office also dealt with those Volunteers [Chinese who worked in the POW camps] who violated our policy, patiently educating them and persuading them to improve. Some of the violators, especially the severe cases, were punished according to the seriousness of their offenses. Through our propaganda and education, which sought to distinguish right from wrong, advantage and disadvantage, and reward and punishment, the CPVF [Chinese People's Volunteer Forces] rank and file saw to it that there were no beatings, insults, murders, abuses, or unlawful searches. Our troops abided by their promises in their own words: 'No envious eyes, nor itching hands, respect the rights of prisoners.'"

Who "Chose China"

According to MacDonald, "The object of the whole education programme was to transform the prisoners into a force which would 'fight for peace' within their own societies upon release." And some American POWs were dramatically affected by the political education they got in the camps.

After the war ended in July of 1953, a group of 21 American POWS refused to be repatriated and chose to live in communist China. The story of these men is the subject of an award-winning documentary, *They Chose China* (recently shown on HBO on demand).[10](#)

The film includes footage of a 1957 Mike Wallace interview with one of the 21, David Hawkins, who was a POW for three years and was only 17 years old when he was captured. He tells Wallace, "I underwent the mass indoctrination program that the Chinese instigated in the camp and there was a lot of things that they told me that sounded to me like common sense." Then given the choice, Hawkins says he went to China "to compare what I had heard with what they actually practiced in China." When Wallace asks him what he had heard, he says: "How great they were working toward socialism, the great stride that they were taking in bettering the life of the Chinese people who for so many thousands of years had lived a life of oppression under various governments and was backward."

The Chinese government mobilized hundreds of young volunteers to work in the POW camps in North Korea. One volunteer interviewed in *They Chose China* said: "During the first few months, two or three POWs died in each unit every day, that's about a dozen per day in every camp, mortality was very high. Doctors and nurses on the medical team worked very hard to save lives and lower the mortality rate. They didn't know our policy, didn't know what we were going to do with them, if we were going to kill them or force them to do hard labor or keep them in China forever and not allow them to return home. So they worried a lot. My supervisor asked me to read the regulations to the POWs. It began with, 'Dear students.' I was very surprised and asked why, because to me they were prisoners and we were their captors. My supervisor said, yes, they are students and you are instructors."

Clarence C. Adams, another POW who chose to live in China, said: "My family and millions of other Negroes plus myself have suffered under the brutal attacks of white supremacy and the cruel slave laws of the southern states... I was born in Memphis, Tennessee. I come from a working class family, my mother worked in laundry, father in furniture factory.... I went in the army in 1947. Captured, Nov 30, 1950."

Recalling life in a POW camp, Adams says: "There wasn't too much friction between prisoners and captors who were the Chinese. We understand the American life, what we wanted. I said, well look, I volunteered, I asked for recreation equipment, I asked if we could set up a recreation hall, I asked if some of the guys are religious, if we could let our cooks cook the way we like, so they agreed with everything we said and in about two and a half to three months, they brought in baseballs, we exercised every day and we began to get strong... I remained in camp until the end of war and the Chinese sent me away to study. Then they sent me back to camp to give lectures and I gave lectures on capitalism, imperialism, history of social development. I learned the difference between all of those, right there in a prisoner of war camp, and I told it to the other prisoners."

Adams also talks about why he became one of the 21: "I chose China for many reasons, with that close contact that we had, I began to wonder about communism, what it was like and the lone fact that every man wants to better his life, he wants to do more in life. I was assured by the camp authorities that well, we don't discriminate, it's not the principle, it's not our principle to discriminate, we believe that all people are equal so that was a great encouragement for me, to help me make my decision. And of course I did ask a question of marriage and could I marry. And they said, we got plenty of women, it depends on whether they like you or not... My first schooling was at the People's University of China, it's where we took a two-year preparatory course. First of all we couldn't speak the language so we

basically dealt in the language and the history of Chinese communist party and the history of the Soviet communist party.”

James Veneris, another former POW, lived out the rest of his life in China. He said he was treated well in the Chinese POW camp and spent hours talking to his captors. Over time he came to see the U.S. war in Korea as “barbaric and warmed to his Communist guards’ egalitarian philosophy.” He recalled thinking, “There is something terrific going on in China. They were building a new world.” Veneris went to live in the city of Jinan, got married, had children and worked in a paper mill. In 1963, he began attending People’s University in Beijing, where he studied Chinese literature, philosophy and the history of the international Communist movement. In 1964, he gave an anti-Vietnam War speech to some 10,000 students. And when the Cultural Revolution started soon after this, he joined in. Veneris recalled distributing thousands of Mao pins on the streets and writing “Big Character Posters” calling for international unity that were hung along a main shopping avenue.[11](#)

By 1966, all of the 21, except James Veneris, had left China—most went back to the United States. The U.S. government considered them traitors, they were unwelcome, and found it hard to find work. Two were committed to mental hospitals. When Clarence Adams came back to Memphis with his Chinese wife and daughter he was hounded by government agents. His daughter Della recalled: “Everyday some men came and took my dad... later I found out it was the CIA, or maybe the FBI or something like that.” Adams was subpoenaed, tried for treason, and finally acquitted after testifying before a Senate committee.

The Real “Brainwash”

So the real truth of how the Chinese communists treated American POWs during the Korean War is completely different than the standard U.S. government and mainstream media stories of “mind control” and “brainwashing.” And it is completely outrageous that this false “history” is now being dredged up as part of the U.S. “war on terror.” A 50-year-old big LIE has been revived to justify U.S. torture with the argument: “we’re only doing what we learned from the communists.”

The whole idea of “brainwashing” is a standard part of U.S. anti-communist propaganda. It serves to demonize communism and scare people, and at the same time justify going to war and using any and all methods of warfare. In other words, if your “enemy” can be portrayed as sub-human, this gives you license to do inhumane things to them.

But there is also another level to this whole brainwashing claim that has to do with the very nature of an imperialist army. To mobilize soldiers to fight horrible, unjust wars the U.S. must promote an unquestioning mindset of, “yours is not to reason why, yours is but to do or die.” Just look at the current U.S. occupation of Iraq where soldiers are indoctrinated with know-nothingism, racism, lies about and demonization of the enemy, etc. And together with this, there is the idea that you’re fighting “for the American way of life,” or even just “to defend your buddy,” or “just trying to do ‘your job’ so you can go home.” This is the kind of mindset U.S. soldiers are trained in and the absurd justifications offered for the war crimes they carry out.

In this context, the very idea that a U.S. soldier captured by the other side would “take up the ideas of the enemy” simply does not compute—such a soldier must be a turncoat who has been “brainwashed.” U.S. POWs who admitted to carrying out biological warfare during the Korean War were known among other POWs as “traitors row.”

U.S. soldiers are not supposed to be thinking human beings—they are fighting machines, driven by irrational patriotism. So there can be no explanation other than “brainwashing” for a U.S. soldier exercising any kind of political consciousness—and even turning *against* how the U.S. military is raining horror on people.

Notes:

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2. “Did the U.S. start germ warfare?” by Peter Pringle, *New Statesman*, October 25, 1999.
3. *The United States and Biological Warfare: Secrets From the Early Cold War* (Indiana University Press, 1998) by Stephen Endicott and Edward Hagerman at York University, Toronto.
4. NYT Limited Hangout on SERE Torture & U.S. Biological Warfare, July 7, 2008, by Michael Otterman, author of the book *American Torture*.
5. *Shock Doctrine* by Naomi Klein, Metropolitan Books, 2007.
6. Korean War Atrocities—Report of the Committee on Government Operations Made Through its Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations by its Subcommittee on Korean War Atrocities, *Pursuant to S. Res. 40, January 11 (legislative day, January 7), 1954*
7. *In Mortal Combat: Korea 1950-1953* by John Toland, William Morrow and Company, 1991. Toland was the first Westerner to gain access to Chinese records and combatants and interviewed North and South Korean veterans and over 200 members of the American military.
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9. *Mao’s Generals Remember Korea*, Translated and edited by Xiaobing Li, Allan R. Millet and Bin Yu, University Press of Kansas, 2001.
10. *They Chose China*, documentary film directed by Shuibo Wang, A National Film Board of Canada Production 2006.
11. “Where are they now? New lives, old secrets” by The Associated Press, November 17, 2004.

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