

Will a Torturer Become CIA Director?

Gina Haspel faces a confirmation hearing on Wednesday to become CIA director despite her record of supporting torture, which even the Pentagon admitted does not work, says Ray McGovern.

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The Senate Intelligence Committee is scheduled on Wednesday to decide whether to recommend that Gina Haspel be confirmed as director of the Central Intelligence Agency. The mind boggles.

It is no secret that Haspel oversaw detainee torture, including waterboarding, at a CIA “black site” base in Thailand. The nonprofit National Security Archive, housed at The George Washington University, reports that Haspel later drafted a cable ordering the destruction of dozens of videotapes of torture sessions, including some from before her arrival. Haspel also helped feed repeated lies about the supposed effectiveness of torture to CIA superiors, Congress, and two presidents.

So how does President Donald Trump think he can get this nomination approved? It is a sad story. Polling shows that most Americans, including Catholics, have been persuaded by Hollywood films and TV series, other media, and Trump himself that torture works.

“Absolutely, I feel it works,” Trump told ABC News in January 2017.

Given the utilitarian tone dominating the discussion, I will first address whether there is any evidence that torture “works,” and then comment on the tendency to equivocate—in what one might call a jesuitical way—about the morality of torture. I must, however, point out upfront that the civilized world has long since decided that torture is intrinsically evil: always wrong. It is also against international and domestic law, of course. But torture is not wrong because it is illegal. It is the other way around. Torture is illegal because it is just flat wrong—always.

Coercing False ‘Intelligence’

On Sept. 6, 2006, Gen. John Kimmons, then the Army deputy chief of staff for intelligence, chose to address this issue publicly at a Pentagon press conference just one hour before he knew that President George W. Bush would publicly extol the virtues of torture methods that became known as “enhanced interrogation techniques.” Gen. Kimmons said,

“No good intelligence is going to come from abusive practices. I think history tells us that. I think the empirical evidence of the last five years—hard years—tell us that.”

Here is the exception, however: Torture can “work” like a charm when interrogators are told to coerce false “intelligence” that can be used, for example, to start a war.

Army Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, who was chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell, has explained how his boss was

mousetrapped by CIA Director George Tenet and his deputy John McLaughlin as Col. Wilkerson was putting the final touches on Secretary Powell’s misbegotten speech on Iraq to the UN Security Council on Feb 5, 2003. Mr. Tenet used information he knew was from torture to mislead Powell into claiming there was a “sinister nexus” between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda.

According to Col. Wilkerson, Tenet did not tell Powell that this “intelligence” came from a source, Abu Yahya al-Libi, who had been “rendered” to and waterboarded by Egyptian intelligence. The Defense Intelligence Agency had officially pronounced unreliable what al-Libi had said, but Tenet never told Powell. Al-Libi then recanted less than a year later, admitting that he fabricated the story about Saddam and al-Qaeda in order to stop the torture.

‘Intrinsic Evil’

Those of us who attended Jesuit institutions decades ago were taught that there was a moral category called “intrinsic evil”—actions that were always wrong, including rape, slavery and torture. Sadly, at my alma mater Fordham University, torture seems to have slipped out of that well-defined moral category into a “gray world.”

Image on the right: Controversy on Rose Hill.



In spring 2012, graduating seniors who were aware of Homeland Security Advisor (and later CIA head) John Brennan’s checkered career strongly opposed the decision by Fordham’s president, Joseph M. McShane, S.J., to invite Brennan, who graduated from Fordham College in 1977, to give the university commencement address on the Bronx campus and be awarded—of all things—a doctorate of humane letters, *honoris causa*. Brennan was already on record defending “extraordinary rendition,” secret prisons abroad and “enhanced interrogation techniques.”

Many Fordham students saw scandal in that the violent policies Brennan advocated were in stark contrast to the principles that Fordham University was supposed to stand for as a Catholic Jesuit University. Scott McDonald, a graduating senior, asked to meet with President McShane to discuss those concerns, but Brennan remained as commencement speaker. McDonald left the meeting wondering if the moral theologians at Fordham now considered torture a “gray area.”

Last year, Fordham again honored Brennan by appointing him distinguished fellow for global security at the school’s Center on National Security. And Brennan has endorsed the Haspel nomination.

I feel all this on a deep personal level. Not only have I been a proud Fordham Ram since 1953 but, more important, we have nine grandchildren, seven of whom have not yet chosen their college. It pains me greatly not to be able to recommend my alma mater.

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Ray McGovern originally drafted this article at the request of the Jesuit weekly, America. It was circulated in-house but then nixed for publication.

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