

Thoughts on Torture

By William R. Polk

Display of naked Iraqi prisoners being humiliated in American military prisons has shocked not only Arabs and Europeans but also most Americans. They need not have been surprised: torture is not new.

Widely practiced by the Germans during World War II, it was standard French procedure during the Algerian war. One of the most influential books on that war, written by Colonel Roger Trinquier, a French paratrooper, argued that torture is to “modern war” what the machinegun was to the First World War. Horrified by what they heard, French critics called torture the “cancer of democracy.” Using it, the French not only destroyed their claim to legitimacy in Algeria and also nearly destroyed French civil life.

If there was a lesson to be learned by the Algerian experience, it certainly was not heeded.

Influenced by the French, American troops and Special Forces used torture in Vietnam. Israeli troops and security forces have employed it for years against the Palestinians. Routinely, almost casually, it is employed in prison systems throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is more common in Europe than most would admit. From Greece, under the regime of the colonels, came a macabre episode: the men employed to torture prisoners, complaining of long hours at low pay, went on strike.

Studies of torture raise two questions that lie behind the horrifying images in the press in recent days: “does torture work?” and “why do governments do it?”

If the objective of torture is to get information, the answer to the first question is “sometimes.” The French in Algeria found that they could “break” a prisoner and find out where his colleagues were hiding or what kind of an operation was being planned. Often, of course, the person being tortured would just say what he thought his tormentors wanted to hear – anything to get them to stop. In any event, he knew he was likely to be killed after he had been “debriefed.” But they had ways to check what he said and, keeping him alive, increased his pain if he lied.

Even if torture often failed to get the sought-after information, it was still an attractive option. Why? I think there are two answers: in the first place, security officers think it might work and they have few other options. Much more important I believe, is the second reason. Some circumstances almost demand brutality.

A century of careful medical and psychiatric studies tell us that the juxtaposition of absolute weakness and absolute power provoke violence. The bound and hooded Iraqi prisoners lying naked on the floor of Abu Ghraib prison “invited” attack.

So shocking is such a statement that few of us have wanted to hear it. To deal with its implications, some scientists, like the Nobel Prize winner Konrad Lorenz, compare us to animals: those animals that have “weapons systems,” like the lion with its claws and fangs, have to practice restraint or they would endanger the survival of their species. The winner in a fight among lions will make ferocious noises but will usually stop short of killing the lion he has just knocked down. In contrast, those creatures, like the dove, the symbol of peace, that do not have lethal weapons have not evolved to practice restraint. Lorenz observed a dove actually torturing another to death.

Our evolution, many students of violence assert, has made us more like doves than lions. All our “weapons systems” are external; our ancestors did not incorporate them into our behavior. So, when as we see in the pictures from Iraq prisoners cowering on the floor, bound, hooded and defenseless, the upright, armed and dominant guards do not show compassion; rather they feel stimulated to attack.

Cultural differences do not seem to influence the willingness of people to torture others. Torture has been reported almost everywhere among peoples of all religions and historical experiences. It does, however, have a racial or cultural dimension: men are more likely to use it against people of a different color or culture than against their own kind. In Vietnam, American soldiers derided “gooks” and in Iraq, “ragheads; Germans despised *untermenschen*; Israelis treat Palestinians as subhuman and so on.

Can a way be found to prevent these horrors? Yes, I think it can. It has two aspects: first, demanding “transparency” in whatever prison system we maintain. This means that we cannot close our eyes or ears to abuses as we naturally prefer to do. Nor can we accept any justification for torture. Those who do it and those who authorize it must know for certain that they will be held responsible for a crime against humanity.

But much more important we must work toward solutions to the situations that promote torture. The obvious first step is to allow self determination. Take one example: when the British granted the Irish demand for independence, torture stopped because it was no longer “needed.” Only when it is no longer “needed” is torture likely to be put aside.

No matter what measures we take, ending torture will not be easy or quick. But in evaluating such difficult policy decisions, we must bear in mind that however much some

people will wish to employ it to avoid attack or to break terrorist cells, doing so not only hurts the victims but brutalizes the torturers. That is the real lesson of the French experience in Algeria. This is what the pictures from Iraq graphically show us. We literally cannot “afford” torture.

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