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Torture Superpower

By Tom Engelhardt

December 18, 2012

On New Year's Eve 2003, Khaled el-Masri, an unemployed car salesman from Germany on vacation in Macedonia, was removed from a bus and kidnapped by the CIA due to a confusion of names. His evidently bore some similarity to an al-Qaeda suspect the Agency wanted to get its hands on. Five months later, after spending time under brutal conditions in an "Afghan" prison called "the Salt Pit" (run by the CIA), he was left at the side of a road in Albania. In between, his life was a catalogue of horrors, torture, and abuse.

Last week, the European Court of Human Rights finally rendered a judgment in his favor, confirming the accuracy of the story he's told for years about his sufferings, fining the Macedonian government for its role in his case, and concluding for the first time in a court of law that "the CIA's rendition techniques amounted to torture." El-Masri's attempt to bring a case in the U.S. legal system against "George Tenet, the former director of the C.I.A., three private airline companies, and 20 individuals identified only as John Doe" for his mistreatment was long ago thrown out, thanks to the "state secrets privilege" — such a trial, so the government claimed, could compromise U.S. national security. In this way, American courts, including the Supreme Court, typically avoided the subject of Bush administration and CIA torture tactics.

El-Masri was one of more than 9,000 individuals who were then being held in a globe-spanning archipelago of injustice, a series of "black sites" and borrowed prisons (as well as borrowed torturers in many cases). Some of those prisoners were, like el-Masri, innocent of any crime whatsoever; some like him had been kidnapped by the CIA; most, whether reasonable suspects or not, were charged with nothing. The crown jewel of this system was, of course, the U.S.

prison built in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, which the present president promised to close within a year of coming into office and which still couldn't be more open.

If the former Soviet Union had built such an overseas gulag, run on the basis of torture and abuse, or if China did so today, there would be no question what Americans would have called it. Official Washington, along with its attendant pundits and think tanks, would have made a professional living off denouncing it as typical of what to expect of such oppressive single-party states. It would have been decried as a horror and a nightmare, an indefensible moral abomination, and a stain on humanity, no matter the information its torturers drew from the prisoners under their control.

And yet when Washington does it, the heated discussion in this country is largely about just how "effective" torture techniques are in eliciting "useful" information. Our courts generally avoid the subject and no one has been prosecuted for its horrific acts. In the meantime, a totally innocent man, whose name sounded like that of a terror suspect, was kidnapped, hooded, shackled, sodomized, flown to a prison in Afghanistan, held without recourse, beaten, tortured, slammed into walls, deprived of sleep, given inadequate food and water, endured total sensory deprivation, and then months later was released in a strange land without a helping hand of any sort. No one in the U.S. government then or since has felt compelled to offer him an explanation, or recompense for what he went through, or an apology of any sort. And with the exception of the usual suspects (like the American Civil Liberties Union), Americans seem to feel few regrets of any sort.

This, then, is what the United States became under George W. Bush and remains under Barack Obama — the sort of country your mother brought you up to avoid. It's shameful. Former State Department official and TomDispatch regular Peter Van Buren, who was hassled by his employer before his retirement for being an honest man and writing a tell-all book about his year on a forward operating base in Iraq, offers a look at just what kind of damage we've done to ourselves in the course of all this. *Tom*

An All-American Nightmare

Why *Zero Dark Thirty* won't settle the torture question or purge torture from the American system

By Peter Van Buren

If you look backward you see a nightmare. If you look forward you become the nightmare.

There's one particular nightmare that Americans need to face: in the first decade of the twenty-first century we tortured people as national policy. One day, we're going to have to confront the reality of what that meant, of what effect it had on its victims and on us, too, we who condoned, supported, or at least allowed it to happen, either passively or with guilty (or guiltless) gusto. If not, torture won't go away. It can't be disappeared like the body of a political prisoner, or conveniently deep-sixed simply by wishing it elsewhere or pretending it never happened or closing our bureaucratic eyes. After the fact, torture can only be dealt with by staring directly into the nightmare that changed us — that, like it or not, helped make us who we now are.

The president, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, has made it clear that no further investigations or inquiries will be made into America's decade of torture. His Justice Department failed to prosecute a single torturer or any of those who helped cover up evidence of the torture practices. But it did deliver a jail sentence to one ex-CIA officer who refused to be trained to torture and was among the first at the CIA to publicly admit that the torture program was real.

At what passes for trials at our prison camp in Guantanamo, Cuba, disclosure of the details of torture is forbidden, effectively preventing anyone from learning anything about what the CIA did with its victims. We are encouraged to do what's best for America and, as Barack Obama put it, "look forward, not backward," with the same zeal as, after 9/11, we were encouraged to save America by going shopping.

Looking into the Eyes of the Tortured

Torture does not leave its victims, nor does it leave a nation that condones it. As an act, it is all about pain, but even more about degradation and humiliation. It destroys its victims, but also demeans those who perpetrate it. I know, because in the course of my 24 years as a State Department officer, I spoke with two men who had been tortured, both by allies of the United States and with at least the tacit approval of Washington. While these men were tortured, Americans in a position to know chose to look the other way for reasons of politics. These men were not movie characters, but complex flesh-and-blood human beings. Meet just one of them once and, I assure you, you'll never follow the president's guidance and move forward trying to forget.

The Korean Poet

The first victim was a Korean poet. I was in Korea at the time as a visa officer working for the State Department at the U.S. Embassy in Seoul. Persons with serious criminal records are normally ineligible to travel to the United States. There is, however, an exception in the law for political crimes. It was initially carved out for Soviet dissidents during the Cold War years. I spoke to the poet as he applied for a visa to determine if his arrest had indeed been "political" and so not a disqualification for his trip to the U.S.

Under the brutal military dictatorship of Park Chung Hee, the poet was tortured for writing anti-government verse. To younger Americans, South Korea is the land of "Gangnam Style," of fashionable clothing and cool, cool electronics. However, within Psy's lifetime, his nation was ruled by a series of military autocrats, supported by the United States in the interest of "national security."

The poet quietly explained to me that, after his work came to the notice of the powers that be, he was taken from his apartment to a small underground cell. Soon, two men arrived and beat him repeatedly on his testicles and sodomized him with one of the tools they had used for the beating. They asked him no questions. In fact, he said, they barely spoke to him at all. Though the pain was beyond his ability to describe, even as a poet, he said that the humiliation of being left so utterly helpless was what remained with him for life, destroyed his marriage, sent him to the repeated empty comfort of alcohol, and kept him from ever putting pen to paper again.

The men who destroyed him, he told me, entered the room, did their work, and then departed, as if they had many others to visit that day and needed to get on with things. The Poet was released a few days later and politely driven back to his apartment by the police in a forward-looking gesture, as if the episode of torture was over and to be forgotten.

The Iraqi Tribal Leader

The second torture victim I met while I was stationed at a forward operating base in Iraq. He was a well-known SOI leader. The SOI, or Sons of Iraq, were Sunni tribesmen who, as part of Iraq War commander General David Petraeus's much-discussed "Anbar Awakening" agreed to stop killing Americans and, in return for money we paid them, take up arms against al-Qaeda. That was 2007. By 2010, when I met the man, the Sons of Iraq, as Sunnis, had no friends in the Shia-dominated government of Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad and the U.S. was expediently allowing its Sunni friendships to fade away.

Over dessert one sticky afternoon, the SOI leader told me that he had recently been released from prison. He explained that the government had wanted him off the street in the run-up to a recent election, so that he would not use his political pull to get in the way of a Shia victory. The prison that held him was a secret one, he told me, under the control of some shadowy part of the U.S.-trained Iraqi security forces.

He had been tortured by agents of the Maliki government, supported by the United States in the interest of national security. Masked men bound him at the wrists and ankles and hung him upside-down. He said that they neither asked him any questions nor demanded any information. They whipped his testicles with a leather strap, then beat the bottoms of his feet and the area around his kidneys. They slapped him. They broke the bones in his right foot with a steel rod, a piece of rebar that would ordinarily have been used to reinforce concrete.

It was painful, he told me, but he had felt pain before. What truly wounded him was the feeling of utter helplessness. A man like himself, he stated with an echo of pride, had never felt helpless. His strength was his ability to control things, to stand up to enemies, to fight, and if necessary, to order men to their deaths. Now, he no longer slept well at night, was less interested in life and its activities, and felt little pleasure. He showed me his blackened toenails, as well as the caved in portion of his foot, which still bore a rod-like indentation with faint signs of metal grooves. When he paused and looked across the room, I thought I could almost see the movie running in his head.

Alone in the Dark

I encountered those two tortured men, who described their experiences so similarly, several years and thousands of miles apart. All they really had in common was being tortured and meeting me. They could, of course, have been lying about, or exaggerating, what had happened to them. I have no way to verify their stories because in neither country were their torturers ever brought to justice. One man was tortured because he was considered a threat to South Korea, the other to Iraq. Those "threatened" governments were among the company the U.S. keeps, and they were known torturers, regularly justifying such horrific acts, as we would also do in the first years of

the twenty-first century, in the name of security. In our case, actual torture techniques would reportedly be demonstrated to some of the highest officials in the land in the White House itself, then “legalized,” and carried out in global “black sites” and foreign prisons.

A widely praised new movie about the assassination of Osama bin Laden, *Zero Dark Thirty*, opens with a series of torture scenes. The victims are various Muslims and al-Qaeda suspects, and the torturers are members of the U.S. government working for the CIA. We see a prisoner strapped to the wall, bloody, with his pants pulled down in front of a female CIA officer. We see another having water poured into his mouth and lungs until he wretches in agony (in what during the Middle Ages was bluntly called “the Water Torture,” later “the water cure,” or more recently “waterboarding”). We see men shoved forcibly into tiny confinement boxes that do not allow them to sit, stand, or lie down.

These are were among the techniques of torture “lawfully” laid out in a CIA Inspector General’s report, some of which would have been alarmingly familiar to the tortured men I spoke with, as they might be to Bradley Manning, held isolated, naked, and without sleep in U.S. military prisons in a bid to break his spirit.

The movie scenes are brutal, yet sanitized. As difficult to watch as the images are, they show nothing beyond the infliction of pain. Horrific as it may be, pain fades, bones mend, bruises heal. No, don’t for a second think that the essence of torture is physical pain, no matter what *Zero Dark Thirty* implies. If, in many cases, the body heals, mental wounds are a far more difficult matter. Memory persists.

The obsessive debate in this country over the effectiveness of torture rings eternally false: torture does indeed work. After all, it’s not just about eliciting information — sometimes, as in the case of the two men I met, it’s not about information at all. Torture is, however, invariably about shame and vengeance, humiliation, power, and control. We’re just slapping you now, but we control you and who knows what will happen next, what we’re capable of? “You lie to me, I hurt you,” says a CIA torturer in *Zero Dark Thirty* to his victim. The torture victim is left to imagine what form the hurt will take and just how severe it will be, almost always in the process assuming responsibility for creating his own terror. Yes, torture “works” — to destroy people.

Khalid Sheik Mohammed, accused 9/11 “mastermind,” was waterboarded 183 times. Al-Jazeera journalist Sami al-Haj spent six years in the Guantanamo Bay prison, stating, “They used dogs on us, they beat me, sometimes they hung me from the ceiling and didn’t allow me to sleep for six days.” Brandon Neely, a U.S. military policeman and former Guantanamo guard, watched a medic there beat an inmate he was supposed to treat. CIA agents tortured a German citizen, a car salesman named Khaled el-Masri, who was picked up in a case of mistaken identity, sodomizing, shackling, and beating him, holding him in total sensory deprivation, as Macedonian state police looked on, so the European Court of Human Rights found last week.

Others, such as the Court of Human Rights or the Senate Intelligence Committee, may give us glimpses into the nightmare of official American policy in the first years of this century. Still, our president refuses to look backward and fully expose the deeds of that near-decade to sunlight; he refuses to truly look forward and unambiguously renounce forever the use of

anything that could be seen as an “enhanced interrogation technique.” Since he also continues to support robustly the precursors to torture — the “extraordinary rendition” of captured terror suspects to allied countries that are perfectly happy to torture them and indefinite detention by decree — we cannot fully understand what men like the Korean poet and the Iraqi tribal leader already know on our behalf: we are torturers and unless we awaken to confront the nightmare of what we are continuing to become, it will eventually transform and so consume us.