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America's Global Torture Network

Robert Scheer
2/7/2013

The title, “Globalizing Torture,” says it all. This meticulous accounting of the network of torture chambers that the United States has authorized in more than 54 nations is a damning indictment that should make all of us in this country cringe with shame.

The report is a product of the Open Society Foundations, funded by international financier and philanthropist George Soros, who, as a young Jew, suffered through the Nazi occupation of Hungary and emerged from that experience an uncompromising fighter for human rights. That his lifelong goal to “foster accountability for international crimes,” reflected in his organization’s mission statement, now includes our government is a condemnation as awful as it is deserved.

When it comes to torture in the post 9/11 era, the record of the United States is so appalling that one must question our claimed abhorrence of the barbarism of other nations. In fact, the essence of our rendition program has been to outsource torture to those countries most sadistic in their use of “enhanced interrogation techniques.” That is flattery of a most twisted sort.

For example, Syria, now universally condemned for its contempt for human life, was chosen as the site to torture Maher Arar, a Canadian citizen detained by U.S. authorities at John F. Kennedy Airport. The apology and financial compensation he received from Canadian officials is only one of three instances of governments apologizing, and that list does not include the United States.

Hosni Mubarak’s Egypt, known for its horrid interrogation tactics condemned in the Arab Spring uprising, was selected by the U.S. to interrogate Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi, who “under threat of

torture at the hands of Egyptian officials, fabricated information relating to Iraq's provision of chemical and biological weapons training to al-Qaida," the report states. That is the very misinformation that Colin Powell relied on in his U.N. speech justifying the Iraq invasion. So much for the evil rationalization for torture as a source of reliable information, offered in the propaganda film "Zero Dark Thirty."

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But the efficacy of torture is not the issue; for example, even if waterboarding, when used by the Japanese against captured American soldiers, provided reliable information, it would not have weakened the U.S. case that such interrogation constituted the commission of war crimes. The point is that in response to what was hardly the most terrifying attack ever experienced by a nation, we launched the most far-reaching torture campaign. No country was impervious to our reach, and all international codes of restraint were summarily breached.

The unalienable human rights endowed to all by their creator—declared as a universal right in our Declaration of Independence—were replaced by the "dark side" declaration of Dick Cheney, quoted in the opening to the torture report: "We also have to work, through, sort of the dark side, if you will. ... We've got to spend time in the shadows in the intelligence world. ... It's going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal, basically, to achieve our objective."

Cheney's argument that the ends justify the means has long been the refuge of murderous scoundrels and rejected by civilized people because evil means inevitably corrupt the most noble of ends. But that truth is too easily ignored in the presence of threats from abroad. George Washington, aware of the dangers that had befallen Rome and other experiments in Republican governance, used his farewell speech "to warn against the mischiefs of foreign intrigue, to guard against the impostures of pretended patriotism. ..."

It is a trap that presidential candidate Barack Obama also warned against, but as president he has ignored. Although it was the administration of George W. Bush that deserves much of the blame for branding this country as proudly pro-torture, the Open Society Foundations report makes clear that Obama has failed to clearly reverse that tragic course. The report contains nine important recommendations, beginning with "Repudiate the CIA's practice of extraordinary rendition" and continues with a list of demands for full public accountability that the Obama administration has blocked.

The report notes that Obama did issue an executive order disavowing torture and created an interagency task force to review interrogation and rendition practices soon after his election. However, it says "the executive order did not repudiate extraordinary rendition, and was crafted to preserve the CIA's authority to detain terrorist suspects on a short-term transitory basis prior to rendering them to another country for interrogation or trial.

"Moreover, the interagency task force report, which was issued in 2009, continues to be withheld from the public. The administration also continues to withhold documents relating to CIA Office of Inspector General investigations into extraordinary rendition and secret detention."

The “dark side” of Cheney’s fantasy refers in the end to the perversion of our democracy in the name of national security. Hideous acts are conducted in our name, and the state relies on our ignorance to gain the public’s acquiescence. Thanks to this excellent Open Society Foundations report, ignorance is a more difficult cop-out.