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Tomgram: Nick Turse, The Hidden History of Water Torture

By Nick Turse
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<http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175653/>

[**Note for TomDispatch Readers:** *The good news is that TomDispatch is back, stronger than ever. As many of you know, it crashed last week after being overwhelmed by visitors. Now, the site, up-armed (special thanks to the Nation Institute's Jayati Vora and Dimitri Siavelis for their help in a crunch) and transferred to a stronger server, is ready for an ever busier future. The downside, as with so many things in this world, is that all of this costs (and will cost) more money. So let me offer a deep bow of thanks to all of you who decided to donate \$100 (or more) for a signed copy of Nick Turse's new book, Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam, which hits #31 on the New York Times extended bestseller list next weekend. At this moment, your outpouring of donations has really made a difference. For anyone who still wants to help, please check out our donation page where, in addition to signed copies of two of Nick's books and a joint book on drone warfare that we did together, several of my books are available, including The United States of Fear and my odyssey through the Cold War years of my childhood (and thereafter), The End of Victory Culture. Tom]*

Sometimes, the world can be such a simple, black-and-white sort of place. Let me give you an example. Imagine for a moment that the Iranians kidnap an American citizen from a third country. (If you prefer, feel free to substitute al-Qaeda or the North Koreans or the Chinese for the Iranians.) They accuse him of being a terrorist. They throw him in jail without charges or a trial or a sentence and claim they suspect he might have crucial information (perhaps even of the

“ticking bomb” sort -- and the Iranians have had some genuine experience with ticking bombs). Over the weeks that follow, they waterboard him time and again. They strip him, put a dog collar and leash on him. They hood him, loose dogs on him. They subject him to freezing cold water and leave him naked on cold nights. They hang him by his arms from the ceiling of his cell in the “strappado” position. I’m sure I really don’t have to go on. Is there any question what we (or our leaders) would think or say?

We would call them barbarians. Beyond the bounds of civilization. Torturers. Monsters. Evil. No one in the U.S. government, on reading CIA intelligence reports about how that American had been treated, would wonder: Is it torture? No one in Washington would have the urge to call what the Iranians (al-Qaeda, the North Koreans, the Chinese) did “enhanced interrogation techniques.” If, on being asked at a Senate hearing whether he thought the Iranian acts were, in fact, “torture,” the prospective director of the CIA demurred, claimed he was no expert on the subject, no lawyer or legal scholar, and simply couldn’t label it as such, he would not be confirmed. He would probably never have a job in Washington again. If asked whether the Iranians who committed such acts against that American and their superiors who ordered them to do so, should be brought before an American or international court and tried, the president would surely not suggest that this was the moment to “look forward, not backward,” nor would his justice department give them a free pass.

You see what I mean? When evil is evil, the world couldn’t be more cut-and-dried. It’s only when, as Nick Turse, author of the bestselling book *Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*, writes today, the acts in question are committed by Americans on Evil Doers, under the orders or encouragement of their superiors, based on policies set at the highest levels in Washington, that such matters become complex, shaded in greys, open to interpretation, understandable in human terms, and explicable by citing ticking-bomb scenarios (however imaginary). *Tom*

**“I Begged for Them to Stop”
Waterboarding Americans and the Redefinition of Torture**
By Nick Turse

Try to remain calm -- even as you begin to feel your chest tighten and your heart race. Try not to panic as water starts flowing into your nose and mouth, while you attempt to constrict your throat and slow your breathing and keep some air in your lungs and fight that growing feeling of suffocation. Try not to think about dying, because there’s nothing you can do about it, because you’re tied down, because someone is pouring that water over your face, forcing it into you, drowning you slowly and deliberately. You’re helpless. You’re in agony.

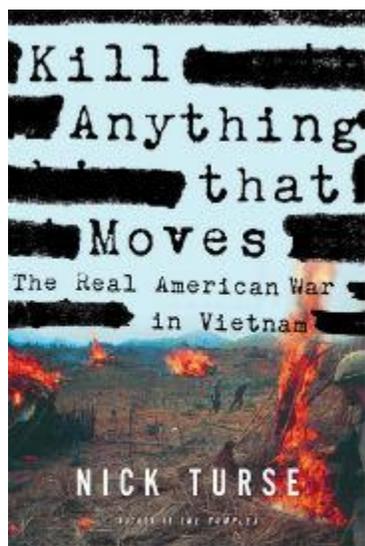
In short, you’re a victim of “water torture.” Or the “water cure.” Or the “water rag.” Or the “water treatment.” Or “*tormenta de toca*.” Or any of the other nicknames given to the particular form of brutality that today goes by the relatively innocuous term “waterboarding.”

The practice only became widely known in the United States after it was disclosed that the CIA had been subjecting suspected terrorists to it in the wake of 9/11. More recently, cinematic depictions of waterboarding in the award-winning film *Zero Dark Thirty* and questions about it

at the Senate confirmation hearing for incoming CIA chief John Brennan have sparked debate. Water torture, however, has a surprisingly long history, dating back to at least the fourteenth century. It has been a U.S. military staple since the beginning of the twentieth century, when it was employed by Americans fighting an independence movement in the Philippines. American troops would continue to use the brutal tactic in the decades to come -- and during the country's repeated wars in Asia, they would be victims of it, too.

Water Torture in Vietnam

For more than a decade, I've investigated atrocities committed during the Vietnam War. In that time, I've come to know people who employed water torture and people who were brutalized by it. Americans and their South Vietnamese allies regularly used it on enemy prisoners and civilian detainees in an effort to gain intelligence or simply punish them. A picture of the practice even landed on the front page of the *Washington Post* on January 21, 1968, but mostly it went on in secret.



Long-hidden military documents help to fill in the picture. "I held the suspect down, placed a cloth over his face, and then poured water over the cloth, thus forcing water into his mouth," Staff Sergeant David Carmon explained in testimony to Army criminal investigators in December 1970. According to their synopsis, he admitted to using both electrical torture and water torture in interrogating a detainee who died not long after.

According to summaries of eyewitness statements by members of Carmon's unit, the prisoner, identified as Nguyen Cong, had been "beat and kicked," lost consciousness, and suffered convulsions. A doctor who examined Nguyen, however, claimed there was nothing wrong with him. Carmon and another member of his military intelligence team then "slapped the Vietnamese and poured water on his face from a five-gallon can," according to a summary of his testimony. An official report from May 1971 states that Nguyen Cong passed out "and was carried to the confinement cage where he was later found dead."

Buy the book

Years later, Carmon told me by email that the abuse of prisoners in Vietnam was extensive and encouraged by superiors. "Nothing was sanctioned," he wrote, "but nothing was off-limits short of seriously injuring a prisoner."

It turns out that Vietnamese prisoners weren't the only ones subjected to water torture in Vietnam. U.S. military personnel serving there were victims, too. Documents I came across in the U.S. National Archives offer a glimpse of a horrifying history that few Americans know anything about.

"I had a 'water job' done on me," one former American prisoner told a military investigator, according to a 1969 Army report. "I was handcuffed and taken to the shower... They held my

head under the shower for about two minutes and when I'd pull back to breath, they beat me on the chest and stomach. This lasted for about 10 minutes, during which I was knocked to the floor twice. When I begged for them to stop, they did."

Another said that his cellmate had rolled their cigarette butts together to fashion a full cigarette. When the guards discovered the "contraband," they grabbed him and hauled him to the showers. "Three of the guards held me and the other one held my face under the shower," he testified. "This lasted quite a while and I thought I was going to drown." Afterward, he said, the same thing was done to his cellmate who, upon returning, admitted that "he confessed" as a result of the torture.

Still another captive testified that handcuffed prisoners were taken to the showers. "The guards would hold the prisoner's head back and make him swallow water," he explained. "This treatment would cause the prisoner to resist which would give the guards an excuse to punch the prisoner." He also testified that it was no isolated incident. "I have witnessed such treatments about nine times."

"Cruel or Unusual"

This wasn't, in fact, the first time Americans had been subjected to water torture while at war in Asia. During World War II, members of the Japanese military used water torture on American prisoners. "I was given what they call the water cure," Lieutenant Chase Nielsen testified after the war. When asked about the experience, he answered: "I felt more or less like I was drowning, just gasping between life and death."

The same tortures were also meted out to American pilots captured during the Korean War. One described his treatment this way: "They would bend my head back, put a towel over my face, and pour water over the towel. I could not breathe... When I would pass out, they would shake me and begin again."

For their crimes against prisoners, including water torture, some Japanese officers were convicted and sentenced to lengthy prison terms, while others were executed.

The legal response to torturers in Vietnam was very different. While investigating allegations against Staff Sergeant Carmon, for instance, Army agents discovered within his unit a pattern of "cruelty and maltreatment" of prisoners that went on from March 1968 to October 1969. According to an official report, Army agents determined that the evidence warranted formal charges against 22 interrogators, many of them implicated in the use of water torture, electrical torture, beatings, and other forms of mistreatment. But neither Carmon nor any of the others was ever charged, court martialed, or punished in any way, according to the records.

There was similar impunity for -- in one of the more bizarre uses of water torture -- Americans who tortured Americans in Vietnam. Although a 1969 Army Inspector General's report into "alleged brutality and maltreatment" noted that "the water treatment was administered as a form of punishment and constitutes a form of maltreatment of prisoners," those who water-tortured American personnel were never tried, let alone sentenced to long prison terms or executed for

their crimes. In fact, those implicated -- Army guards working at the American detention facility informally known as Long Binh Jail -- apparently escaped any punishment whatsoever.

This record of impunity has continued in more recent years. While the CIA has acknowledged its use of waterboarding after 9/11 and President Obama has unambiguously stated that the practice is a method of torture, his administration declared that no one would be prosecuted for utilizing it or any other “enhanced interrogation technique.” As a CIA spokesperson pointed out to ProPublica last year, after reviewing the Agency’s treatment of more than 100 detainees, the Department of Justice “declined prosecution in every case.”

The 1969 Inspector General’s report on American torture of American prisoners unequivocally defined the “water treatment” meted out to jailed American military personnel as “cruel or unusual.” Bush administration lawyers in the post-9/11 years, however, attempted to redefine the drowning of defenseless prisoners as something less than torture, basically turning the clock back to the ethical standards of the Spanish Inquisition.

At least that 1969 report noted that water torture “was administered without authority” to those American prisoners. The current situation has been radically different. In recent years, it wasn’t merely low-level brutalizers and their immediate superiors who sanctioned and approved torture techniques, but senior White House officials, including National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and Vice President Dick Cheney. From George W. Bush’s own memoir, we know that the previous president gave an enthusiastic order (“Damn right!”) to subject other human beings to water torture, just as we know that President Obama has made certain no one in the government involved in ordering or facilitating such acts would ever answer for any of them.

In 1901, an American officer was sentenced to 10 years at hard labor for waterboarding a Filipino prisoner. By the late 1940s, the centuries-old practice was so reviled that significant prison time or even death lay in store for those using it. In the late 1960s, it was still viewed as a cruel and unusual punishment, even if U.S. troops who tortured Vietnamese and American captives weren’t subject to prosecution for it. In the twenty-first century, as water torture moved from Southeast Asian prison showers to the White House, it also morphed into an “enhanced interrogation technique.” Today, the president’s pick to head the CIA refuses even to label waterboarding as “torture.”

What does it say about a society when its morals and ethics on the treatment of captives go into reverse? What are we to make of leaders who authorize, promote, or shield such brutal practices or about citizens who stand by and allow them to happen? What does it mean when torture, already the definition of “cruel,” becomes usual?

Nick Turse is the managing editor of TomDispatch.com and a fellow at the Nation Institute. An award-winning journalist, his work has appeared in the Los Angeles Times, the Nation, and regularly at TomDispatch. He is the author most recently of the New York Times bestseller Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam (The American Empire Project, Metropolitan Books). You can watch his recent conversation with Bill Moyers about that book by [clicking here](#). His website is [NickTurse.com](#). You can follow him on Tumblr and on [Facebook](#).

[**Note:** I'm not the first to write about the American use of water torture on U.S. prisoners in Vietnam. See Cecil B. Currey's 1999 volume, *Long Binh Jail: An Oral History of Vietnam's Notorious U.S. Military Prison*. For an account, both gripping and harrowing, by a victim of water torture, see *The Question*, journalist Henri Alleg's bite-sized account of his torture by French forces in Algeria during the 1950s.]