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The CIAtanic Verses

By Tim Hartnett

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The definition of torture has been in some dispute since ancient times. Julius Caesar had the Illyrian pirates who kidnapped him executed before they were crucified. "Caesar is merciful," he supposedly said, "you did not torture me and I will not torture you." But the erstwhile conqueror of Gaul's abductors didn't see it that way. During the captivity Caesar recited his poetry to the pirates who described the experience as a grisly ordeal. No historic record exists casting aspersions on Illyrian literary judgment. Caesar's cruelty, both as a military commander and a versifier, is well established. So whose word should we take on the matter?

A hash of leftover CIA torture allegations has been getting moldy in the fridge for a good five years or more now. That dish was put back on a front burner the morning of April 1st by a WP Summary of the Senate's 6,300 page report classified top secret. If what it says in that article is true a lot of detainees had it far worse than a captive audience for Caesar's most bombastic recital. And this was after they'd already spilled their guts. Fortunately for the Company image none of the subjects had a resume brimming with crowd appeal. The less faint-hearted among us would say a little sadism was easily justified. There's an overcrowded school of American thinking that's been blaming the 9-11 attacks, and lots of other disasters, on softball in national policy making.

Alumni of this alma mater routinely discount any rumors the US has been playing fast and loose with the rules since before the days Jethro aspired to be a double-naught spy. The gossip, always roundly dismissed from D.C. offices of the utmost integrity, has an uncanny knack for turning

out to be true though. The hippies were wrong about a lot of things but most of their paranoia about government sneaks ended up getting confirmed over the years. The media can shift focus after official denials, because you know third-worlders, people accused by the FBI, conspiracy theorists and the like lie, but not high-ranking officers of the US government. And when it turns out they fibbed that first time the question came up? Well, can you fault a loyal employee of the greatest country in the world for something that *might* have happened to an insignificant foreigner 10 years ago?

This pattern has a repetitive resilience that even the major media notices from time to time. They never harp on it though. Our government is very tolerant of free speech, in theory anyway, so reporters don't want to push it by getting boring on them. The Pentagon, Langley, the NSA and their shadowy minions do have limits after all. So when something lurid breaks nobody in the big league press is petty enough to bring up stuff like The School of the Americas, pre-9-11 extraordinary rendition, and the whole sordid history of coups, assassination, payoffs to cutthroats and political strong-arming our leadership finds vital to our way of life. That could place our whole defense structure on the defense and important people might find that offensive. Recidivism only counts if you're keeping score.

And there's a special advantage to giving the details of US roughhousing a wide berth. After winking for decades at tough love abroad dotting on running roughshod over Americans seems paltry too. Hey, if it works on Abdul why not Joe-Six-pack?

The 20th anniversary of Waco went almost unnoticed last year in mainstream media and the alternative media wasn't doing much blubbering either. John Danforth's official report which came 7½ years after the incident found no fault with the tactical raid February 28th 1993. By the time the report was issued American abodes were suffering at least 15 times the number of these operations than in the early Reagan years.

What's generally forgotten is the blitzkrieg assault on the public psyche that took SWAT from the mean streets of LA to Main Street in Mayberry. The sales campaign was as unconventional as the product it purveyed. The primary promotional vehicle for the idea was TV crime drama. A favored scenario put an old, weak, feeble woman or a helpless child in the clutches of a craven maniac. The crack teams who saved the day were always more concerned with even the villain's safety than the audience would have been. "I'd have smashed his f---n brains in," or something like it, usually erupted from the easier prey in group viewings.

It's a near certainty that every man storming Mt. Carmel that Sunday morning had seen a few of these shows. Most may have expected the operation to make the news by Monday but not as a busted assault turned siege. Editing the videotape with priceless sound-bites from rescued kids was the next step they must have been looking forward to, and that's giving benefit of the doubt. Otherwise they were prepared for live-fire and hand to hand combat in a building with a majority of women and children in it.

However contrary to the facts men with guns and badges are easy to convince they are saving people. And they're still convinced 21 years later. This modus operandi remains all the rage in law enforcement, the pace only quickened over those 85 bodies. Practice makes perfect perhaps

and Federal officials aren't keeping score on the dead racked up since. In spite of the images etched into everyone's brain April 19th, 1993 the craze for tanks and mechanized equipment continues unabated. The 25 children under those walls are no different than collateral damage to a Panzer unit headed eastward in 1939.

The lore that created esprit d'corps at the Central Intelligence Agency is not quite as vivid. TV wasn't so pervasive then. After 2 wars and The Great Depression the Democrats going into a 5th term didn't mind so much about popular volition. It couldn't be too wide of the mark presuming that the catechism of the new faith talked a lot about saving things. Whether it was people, culture, democracy or souls from the Soviet Union. And like SWAT today there's no table we can Google for an accounting of collateral damage, if we have the generosity to call it that.

So in places like Malaysia, Indonesia, Guatemala, Iran, Vietnam, Chile or any remote despotic fiefdom or Xeno-stan the cause prevailed over the carnage. That's without even counting people like Frank Olson who committed suicide, officially at least, after being massively dosed with LSD by the agency in 1953. Or what, exactly, was the effect of Henry Murray's experiments on subjects like Ted Kaczynski?

From the outset the CIA, the FBI and the rest of the alphabet soup has had bards and balladeers waxing poetic over their exploits and gallantry. Mainstream media was dragged into the act too without much kicking and screaming. If anyone is alive today that can remember the separation of the statist church from the voice of the free world their days are numbered. The phrase "compelling state interest" comes to us from the 1957 Supreme Court case *Sweezy v. New Hampshire*. That decision, to keep state scrutiny out of college classrooms, came roughly simultaneous to the CIA's intrusion into the curriculum, (see also) and the overall political culture. The details of what was done at the time and since to sabotage legitimate political movements establishment figures found unsavory remain mostly buried.

So wherever we're at today our political fate has been irretrievably skewed off course like Heisenberg's electron. A covert panel of zillionaires, media moguls, gravely superior academics and international men of mystery has been about defining America for generations to make sure you don't. They tell us, "We have to fight them over there so we won't have to over here." Only a traitor makes any connection between all the ones the government torments stateside and the perpetual battle for freedom on foreign soil.

There may have been people who learned to like Caesar's poetry. God knows we've got'em that have learned to like Toby Keith, Darryl Worley, Vince Flynn and Jack Bauer in our own republic and century. Maybe the human race can be conditioned to thrive on a cultural junk food diet of this kind of stuff. Once we reach that point why bother defining torture?