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CIA psychologists got millions for interrogation techniques, face new scrutiny

By Michael Doyle and Marisa Taylor

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The well-paid psychologists had a plan and a contract to make terrorists talk.

And when Khalid Sheikh Mohammed resisted, a CIA officer confided in 2003 that one of the psychologists promised he was “going to go to school on this guy,” according to a new Senate Intelligence Committee report.

Private contractors James E. Mitchell and Bruce Jessen then unleashed the harsh interrogation techniques they had helped design.

Coercive interrogation tools such waterboarding, slapping and sleep deprivation proved lucrative to Mitchell and Jessen even as they triggered alarms among intelligence professionals over the brutal handling of detainees such as the suspected mastermind of 9/11, the report shows.

“Although these guys believe that their way is the only way, there should be an effort to define roles and responsibilities before their arrogance and narcissism evolve into unproductive conflict in the field,” a CIA medical professional warned in a June 16, 2003, email.

The two psychologists, who collected millions of dollars from the CIA, are among the few identifiable major players whose actions are spotlighted in the report made public Tuesday. That could put them at the center of a growing call for legal consequences.

“If the allegations are true, their behavior was a clear violation of the profession’s ethical standards, clear violations of human rights, and probably violations of U.S. and international laws,” Rhea Farberman, the spokeswoman for the American Psychological Association, said in an interview Wednesday. “They should be held accountable.”

The resulting fallout from the now-defunct program set up to detain and interrogate terror suspects overseas already has proven costly to taxpayers, as the CIA remains on the hook for covering legal expenses for the men through 2021.

Mitchell did not return calls but has denied responsibility for CIA abuses. Jessen could not be reached for comment.

“What I would love the American people to know is that the way the Senate Democrats on that committee described the credentials and background of the two psychologists is just factually, demonstrably incorrect,” Mitchell told The Associated Press before declining to detail the inaccuracies, citing a secrecy agreement with the CIA.

According to the Senate panel’s report, the CIA held at least 119 people in secret overseas prisons — some of whom turned out to be innocent — and subjected many to gruesome interrogations that didn’t lead to any high-level terrorists, including Osama bin Laden.

Under the program, detainees were interrogated for days on end, hooded and dragged naked across floors while being beaten, threatened with death, deprived of sleep for up to a week, and subjected without medical reason to “rectal rehydration” and to “rectal feeding” with a puree of hummus, raisins, nuts and pasta with sauce, the report said.

While White House press secretary Josh Earnest said Wednesday that the Justice Department had already examined the interrogation program and declined to prosecute those accused of abuses, some lawmakers called for further action.

“No one has been held to account,” said Sen. Mark Udall, D-Colo., a member of the Intelligence Committee.

The 524-page Intelligence Committee report made public Tuesday asserts the psychologists played prominent roles in interrogations from the outset of the CIA program.

One FBI agent described how they had “tremendous influence” in interrogations that initially were conducted jointly with the bureau and the CIA. The FBI tried without success to explain its traditional “rapport-building approaches” to the CIA interrogation team.

“We have used this approach before on other al-Qaida members with much success,” the report quoted an FBI agent as saying. “We tried to politely suggest that valuable time was passing where we could attempt to solicit threat information.”

The FBI eventually withdrew its agents from the interrogation program, objecting to the CIA’s harsh tactics.

Formerly employed at the Air Force’s tough Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape School in Washington state, neither man had experience as an interrogator or as an expert in terrorism. Both, though, saw a patriotic opportunity after the 9/11 terror attacks. Mitchell, a Florida resident, and Jessen, a Washington state resident, are dubbed with code names in the study.

“The CIA did not seek out (Mitchell and Jessen) after a decision was made to use coercive interrogation techniques,” the Senate Intelligence Committee report noted. “Rather, (Mitchell and Jessen) played a role in convincing the CIA to adopt such a policy.”

The psychologists’ expertise with waterboarding, a 2004 CIA Inspector General report previously stated, “was probably misrepresented at the time,” as their prior work with U.S. airmen at the Air Force school was “almost irrelevant” to the interrogation of suspected terrorists.

Mitchell and Jessen nonetheless flourished as they hired former CIA officers, the new report shows. They traveled the world, consulted with foreign intelligence operatives and briefed the likes of then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Their company provided interrogators, psychologists, debriefers and security personnel at CIA detention sites overseas. They ran a project dubbed the “Terrorist Think Tank,” designed to understand the terrorist “mind set.” They helped write the history of the CIA’s detention and interrogation program.

All the while, they earned millions of dollars.

By 2006, one year after Mitchell, Jessen & Associates was founded, the value of their base contract was “in excess of \$180 million,” Senate investigators found. All told, the CIA has spent \$81 million on the company’s contract. Some went directly for interrogation services, in amounts that caught the eyes of CIA professionals.

A CIA medical doctor, for instance, warned in a previously undisclosed internal agency review about a “conflict of interest” that was “nowhere more graphic” than in paying the two contract psychologists to simultaneously apply an interrogation technique, judge its effectiveness and recommend its continued use.

“At a daily compensation reported to be \$1,800/day, or four times that of interrogators who could not use the technique,” the CIA medical doctor noted.

Some of the payments to the interrogation contractors have gone for associated costs.

In 2007, for instance, the media was sniffing around for interrogation stories. The CIA paid about \$570,000 to Mitchell, Jessen & Associates for “counter-surveillance” of the company’s employees, in an apparent effort to ferret out leakers.

The CIA also agreed to an indemnification contract in 2007, covering up to \$5 million in legal expenses. Through 2012, the contractors’ law firm had billed the CIA \$1.1 million, which included representing the men when they briefed Senate Intelligence Committee staffers in November 2008.

Experts said the two psychologists’ role in the program highlights yet another disturbing aspect of the now-defunct interrogation and detention program — that the spy agency did not seek advice from trained interrogators and relied on bad science.

A “body of emerging science” shows rapport-building techniques were more effective than torture, said Farberman, the American Psychological Association spokeswoman.

The association itself has come under fire for allegations that it colluded with the Bush administration to support the use of torture. As a result, the group recently launched an independent review. That inquiry does not include Jessen’s and Mitchell’s role in the program because they are not members of the association.

The association, however, reacted with “disgust” to the details revealed in the report, Farberman said.

Michael Quigley, a former military interrogator between 2003 and 2008, said the CIA made a mistake when it relied on psychologists with backgrounds in training military personnel how to resist harsh interrogation techniques. As a result, the spy agency ironically ended up stiffening the resolve of terror suspects.

“The CIA never had anyone with proper interrogation background to build this program,” Quigley said. “The greatest proponents of this program — from the director at the CIA to a lawyer at the CIA — have never interrogated anyone. They are defending a program that they don’t fully understand because it is not within their professional experience.”