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U.S. TV Provides Ample Platform for American Torturers, But None to Their Victims

By Glenn Greenwald
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Ever since the torture report was released last week, U.S. television outlets have endlessly featured American torturers and torture proponents. But there was one group that was almost never heard from: the victims of their torture, not even the ones recognized by the U.S. Government itself as innocent, not even the family members of the ones they tortured to death. Whether by design (most likely) or effect, this inexcusable omission radically distorts coverage.

Whenever America is forced to confront its heinous acts, the central strategy is to disappear the victims, render them invisible. That's what robs them of their humanity: it's the process of dehumanization. That, in turns, is what enables American elites first to support atrocities, and then, when forced to reckon with them, tell themselves that - despite some isolated and well-intentioned bad acts – they are still really good, elevated, noble, admirable people. It's hardly surprising, then, that a *Washington Post*/ABC News poll released this morning found that a large majority of Americans believe torture is justified even when you call it "torture." Not having to think about actual human victims makes it easy to justify any sort of crime.

That's the process by which the reliably repellent Tom Friedman seized on the torture report to celebrate America's unique greatness. "We are a beacon of opportunity and freedom, and also [] these foreigners know in their bones that we do things differently from other big powers in history," the beloved-by-DC columnist wrote after reading about forced rectal feeding and freezing detainees to death. For the opinion-making class, even America's savage torture is proof of its superiority and inherent Goodness: "this act of self-examination is not only what keeps our society as a whole healthy, it's what keeps us a model that others want to emulate, partner with and immigrate to." Friedman, who himself unleashed one of the most (literally) psychotic defenses of the Iraq War, ended his torture discussion by approvingly quoting John McCain on America's enduring moral superiority: "Even in the worst of times, 'we are always Americans, and different, stronger, and better than those who would destroy us.'"

This self-glorifying ritual can be sustained only by completely suppressing America's victims. If you don't hear from the human beings who are tortured, it's easy to pretend nothing truly terrible happened. That's how the War on Terror generally has been "reported" for 13 years and counting: by completely silencing those whose lives are destroyed or ended by U.S. crimes. That's how the illusion gets sustained.

Thus, we sometimes hear about drones (usually to celebrate the Great Kills) but almost never hear from their victims: the surviving family members of innocents whom the U.S. kills or those forced to live under the traumatizing regime of permanently circling death robots. We periodically hear about the vile regimes the U.S. props up for decades, but almost never from the dissidents and activists imprisoned, tortured and killed by those allied tyrants. Most Americans have heard the words "rendition" and "Guantanamo" but could not name a single person victimized by them, let alone recount what happened to them, because they almost never appear on American television.

It would be incredibly easy, and incredibly effective, for U.S. television outlets to interview America's torture victims. There is certainly no shortage of them. Groups such as the ACLU, Center for Constitutional Rights, Reprieve, and CAGE UK represent many of them. Many are incredibly smart and eloquent, and have spent years contemplating what happened to them and navigating the aftermath on their lives.

I've written previously about the transformative experience of meeting and hearing directly from the victims of the abuses by your own government. That human interaction converts an injustice from an abstraction into a deeply felt rage and disgust. That's precisely why the U.S. media

doesn't air those stories directly from the victims themselves: because it would make it impossible to maintain the pleasing fairy tales about "who we really are."

When I was in Canada in October, I met Maher Arar (pictured above) for the second time, went to his home, had breakfast with his wife (also pictured above) and two children. In 2002, Maher, a Canadian citizen of Syrian descent who worked as an engineer, was traveling back home to Ottawa when he was abducted by the U.S. Government at JFK Airport, held *incommunicado* and interrogated for weeks, then "rendered" to Syria where the U.S. arranged to have him brutally tortured by Assad's regime. He was kept in a coffin-like cell for 10 months and savagely tortured until even his Syrian captors were convinced that he was completely innocent. He was then unceremoniously released back to his life in Canada as though nothing had happened.

When he sued the U.S. government, subservient U.S. courts refused even to hear his case, accepting the Obama DOJ's claim that it was too secret to safely adjudicate. The Canadian government released the findings of its investigation, publicly apologized for its role, and paid him \$9 million. He used some of the money to start a political newspaper, which has since closed. He became an eloquent opponent of both the U.S. War on Terror and the Assad regime which tortured him as part of it.

But all you have to do is spend five minutes talking to him to see that he has never really recovered from being snatched from his own life and savagely tortured at the behest of the U.S. Government that still holds itself out as the Leader of the Free World. Part of him is still back in the torture chamber in Syria, and likely always will be.

Nobody could listen to Maher Arar speak and feel anything but disgust and outrage toward the U.S. Government – not just the Bush administration which kidnapped him and sent him to be tortured, but the Obama administration which protected them and blocked him from receiving justice, and the American media that turned a blind eye toward it, and the majority of the American public that supports this. But that's exactly why we don't hear from him: he isn't on CNN or *Meet the Press* or *Morning Joe* to make clear what Michael Hayden and John Yoo really did and what the U.S. government under a Democratic president continues to shield.

There are hundreds if not thousands of Maher Arars the U.S. media could easily and powerfully interview. McClatchy this week detailed the story of Khalid al Masri, a German citizen whom the U.S. Government abducted in Macedonia, tortured, and then dumped on a road when they decided he wasn't guilty of anything (US courts also refused to hear his case on secrecy grounds). The detainees held without charges, tortured, and then unceremoniously released from Guantanamo and Bagram are rarely if ever heard from on U.S. television, even when the U.S. Government is forced to admit that they were guilty of nothing.

This is not to say that merely putting these victims on television would fundamentally change how these issues are perceived. Many Americans would look at the largely non-white and foreign faces recounting their abuses, or take note of their demonized religion and ethnicity, and react for that reason with indifference or even support for what was done to them.

And one could easily imagine such interviews quickly degenerating into a blame-the-victim spectacle. When Fareed Zakaria this week interviewed former Guantanamo detainee (and current detainee rights advocate) Moazzem Begg, Zakaria demanded that Begg condemn ISIS even though Begg kept explaining that he was “abused cruelly, inhumanely and degradingly” by the U.S. Government, that “pictures of my children are waved in front of me while I’m being beaten and tortured and abused by people who claimed to be the bastions of freedom and democracy and human rights,” and that “whatever the situation was, the Taliban and the ISIS, they didn’t torture me. They didn’t put me into dungeons. They didn’t beat me. They didn’t threaten to, you know, abuse my family. They didn’t do that to me. So I can only talk to my experience.”

What this glaring omission in coverage does more than anything else is conclusively expose the utter fraud of the U.S. media’s claims to “objectivity” and “neutrality.” Outlets like *The Washington Post* and NPR *still* justify their refusal to call these torture tactics “torture” by invoking precepts of “neutrality”: we have to show all views, we can’t take sides, etc.

But that’s pure deceit. They don’t show all sides. They systematically and quite deliberately exclude the victims of the very policies of the U.S. Government they pretend to cover. And they do that because including those victims would be too informative, would provide too much information, would be too enlightening. It would, for many people, shatter the myths of American Goodness and the conceit that even when Americans do heinous things, they do it with Goodness and Freedom in their hearts, with a guaranteed and permanent status as superior. At the very least, it would make it impossible for many people to deny to themselves the utter savagery and sadism carried out in their names.

Keeping those victims silenced and invisible is the biggest favor the U.S. television media could do for the government over which they claim to act as watchdogs. So that’s what they do: dutifully, eagerly and with very rare exception.