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Torture With Impunity

Why the CIA Will Never be Held Accountable

by BARRY LANDO

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The U.S. Senate's shocking report on CIA torture during the George W. Bush administration's War on Terror has provoked a storm of outrage, and calls for at least some form of punishment of those responsible. It's unlikely those calls will ever be heeded.

The fact is that the CIA under America's leaders—Republican *and* Democrat—has been implicated in torture around the globe for at least the past half century.

One of the first victims of torture I met was Jovelina Nascimento, a soft-spoken young woman, I interviewed in 1971 in Santiago, Chile for CBS News.

She'd been arrested in 1970 in Sao Paulo, Brazil, along with her two-year old son and husband, Manuel, a Brazilian labor leader. He'd had to go underground as the military regime, which seized power in 1964 became ever more repressive. Torture was one of their tools. All the Nascimento family was obliged to watch.

“I tried to tell my son that the police were really not hurting his father,” Jovelina told me. “He kept on crying, telling me to make them stop beating his father. So they finally took my son away.”

“Then they stripped my husband and hung him up on the ‘parrot’s perch’ in front of me. They gave him electric shocks. He couldn’t help screaming. It’s impossible not to scream. Then they took him off and hung me up naked on the ‘parrot’s perch’ in front of him, and gave me electric shocks in all parts of the body.”

Jovelina was one of several Brazilian exiles whom I interviewed in Santiago. Many of those lucky enough to have been released from prison in Brazil, had fled to shelter in Chile, where Socialist President Salvador Allende was president.

Thousands of other Brazilians remained locked up. Hundreds—perhaps thousands—continued to be tortured. Hundreds had been “disappeared.”

The extent of that barbarity was revealed in another shocking report by the Brazilian Congress’s “truth commission” released the day after the U.S. Senate Committee Report:

“Agents of Brazil’s military dictatorship crucified some torture victims, beating the palms of their hands with sticks as they hung on the walls of interrogation centers. Other victims had insects like cockroaches introduced into their bodies. Interrogators submitted prisoners, including Dilma Rousseff, a former guerrilla who is now Brazil’s president, to electric shocks.”

No question that Brazil’s military were primarily responsible for those crimes. But, the United States and the CIA were also directly implicated in the torture and terror that wracked not just Brazil, but much of Latin America for decades.

That fact was also spelled out by the Brazilian commission, with the help of formerly classified U.S. government documents they were furnished by the Obama administration.

According to Rio’s *O Globo*, the commission found that 300 members of the Brazilian military spent time at the School of the Americas, run out of Fort Benning Georgia. While there, attendees “had theoretical and practical lessons on torture, which would later be replicated in Brazil.”

In his book “Torture and Impunity: The U.S. Doctrine of Coercive Interrogation,” historian Alfred W. McCoy writes that American instructors at the School of the Americas emphasized tortures that, though they might permanently cripple the victim psychologically, wouldn’t leave physical scars—such techniques as forcing prisoners to maintain excruciating positions without sleep, often for days on end; assaulting the senses with blinding light and deafening sound; or creating a hallucinatory environment of total sensory deprivation. There were also mock executions, physical humiliation, threats of rape or death to family members, virtual “burial” in a coffin-sized confinement.

The CIA began secretly researching such techniques under President Eisenhower. As Mc Coy puts it, they were out “to crack the code of human consciousness, a veritable Manhattan project of the mind, with costs that peaked at a billion dollars a year.” They were spurred on by news of Soviet mind-control experiments and methods used in Soviet KGB interrogations.

As the Cold War continued, the CIA refined their torture techniques, propagating them within the U.S. intelligence community and among America’s anti communist allies. The CIA also helped set up sophisticated databases and provided material—for instance, shipping polygraph and electroshock machines in diplomatic pouches to U.S. Public Safety officers across Latin America.

There was a growing demand for their product. Indeed, the brutality of the Brazilian military was nothing compared to the barbarity of right-wing regimes that took power in Chile in 1973 and Argentina in 1976. The U.S. provided not just technical advice and equipment, but political cover as well. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was adamant that concerns about such things as torture and disappearances not get in the way of full-throated U.S. backing for America’s military allies.

After learning later that State Department officials had made a formal protest to the new military junta in Argentina out of concern for the growing number of political assassinations and disappearances, Kissinger fumed: “I want to know who did this and consider having him transferred.”

In fact, while U.S. Ambassador Hill was attempting to reign in Argentine excesses. Kissinger was reassuring Argentine Admiral Guzzetti: “In the United States we have strong domestic pressures to do something on human rights... We want you to succeed. We do not want to harrass [sic] you.”

Later, Ambassador Hill sent a bitter complaint to the Department of State that Guzzetti had returned to Argentina in a “*state of jubilation*” after another meeting with Kissinger.

In Central America, in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, it was the same picture: right wing regimes, closely allied with the United States, receiving encouragement, political cover, material support and training in torture by the U. S.

Indeed, the CIA was also able to establish a kind of old boys network, bringing Argentine officers, veterans of that nation’s “dirty war”, to Honduras to train local army interrogators as well as Contras from neighboring Nicaragua.

The CIA’s links with torture and brutal allies extended far beyond Latin America. The Agency was intimately involved with the Shah of Iran’s secret police, the Savak. It was also behind the infamous Phoenix Program in South Vietnam which the U.S. financed and directed between 1965 and 1972, in a bloody but ultimately futile attempt to destroy the Viet Cong.

The program operated forty interrogation centers that killed more than twenty thousand suspects and tortured countless thousands others. Later, officials connected with the program admitted

that most of those eliminated were low-ranking VC; many had no important links with the guerrillas at all.

Because of the outcry provoked by media reports and congressional investigations into the CIA's involvement with such lurid projects, the Agency according to its own inspector general, discontinued all involvement in brutal interrogation techniques. Thus, when they were ordered to take off the gloves after 9/11, there was a considerable amount of improvising, both for the CIA and the American military.

That led, among other things, to the horrors of Abu Ghraib, perpetrated by outside contractors and army reservists, overwhelmed by the masses of prisoners they were ordered to somehow cope with.

In order to avoid direct involvement in the more violent forms of torture, the Bush—and later the Obama—administrations also shipped scores of suspects caught up in the War on Terror off to dark holes in Poland, or Morocco, Jordan, Egypt, and Ethiopia; even Uzbekistan infamous for its torturers.

Craig Murray, the British Ambassador there, complained to London at the time, “We receive intelligence obtained under torture from the Uzbek intelligence services, via the U.S.... Tortured dupes are forced to sign confessions showing what the Uzbek government wants the US and UK to believe, that they are we are fighting the same war against terror.”

Cooperation in the war on terror went both ways. The United States has allowed security officials from countries with some of the worst human rights records, such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Libya, Jordan, China, and Tunisia to interrogate prisoners at Guantánamo.

According to the Center for Constitutional Rights, “Detainees have been subjected to threats and abuse from these foreign interrogators, with the active involvement of U.S. forces in Guantánamo. Further, threats of torture, imprisonment, harm to one's family and even death upon return to their home country have solidified detainees' fears of forced repatriation in some instances.

For instance, after Uzbek interrogators threatened to torture him and his family upon his return, and claimed that the U.S. government was sending him back, one Uzbek prisoner attempted to hang himself in his prison cell. After he recovered, he was turned over again to the Uzbek interrogators who continued their brutal threats.

On another occasion, in 2004 Libyan intelligence asked the CIA to “render” to them an Islamic activist named Abdel Hakim Belhaj. Aided by Britain's MI5 intelligence agency, the CIA had the suspect seized at Kuala Lumpur, assigned two agents to torture him in Bangkok, and then flew him and his pregnant wife home to Libya for six years of beatings and solitary confinement inside the worst of Qaddafi's prisons. He claims that while incarcerated he was also questioned by British interrogators.

Now a major political figure in post-Qaddafi's Libya, Belhaj has just won the right to sue the UK government over his kidnapping. The British court didn't buy the government's argument that by revealing the facts of the case (i.e. the involvement of the CIA), relations between the UK and the U.S. would be seriously damaged.

Which makes the point that, despite the horrific report on CIA just released in the U.S., despite the outrage provoked little—if anything—is going to happen. If anyone is to be penalized or punished or even publicly reprimanded for the atrocities that took place during the War on Terror, it is much more likely to be officials from other countries, who may be called to task for their role in the American-led crusade. The Brazilian report, for instance, cites 377 people who were involved with torture in their country by name. The U.S. Senate's report cites nary a one.

Officials directly responsible for the CIA's torture, such as Dick Cheney, who in other times and places, might have faced trial as a war criminals, are instead on television, actually boasting of their obscene actions, claiming—falsely—that torture produced important results—even as they attempt to deny that “torture” actually took place. Meanwhile, mainstream U.S. media tip-toe around actually using the “T word.”

President Obama himself indicates he has no stomach to see anyone punished. He just wants, he says, to turn the page.

How then will anything change? Good question. The New York Time's Anthony Lewis posed a similar one in 1988, after commenting on an expose of the CIA involvement with torture and repression in Honduras, by Times reporter James Le Moyne. Lewis concluded:

”American officials who spoke to me about these matters,” Mr. LeMoyne wrote, ”seemed deeply troubled by the political and moral meaning they held.”

Yes, the American conscience still exists. Our public would not accept involvement with such cruelty if it knew. But it does not know until someone breaks the silence. Secrecy prevents accountability.

The policy has operated in the dark for years, under more than one Administration. Will there be a President soon who understands the costs, human and political? Who has the courage to say ”Enough”?

That question was asked 26 years ago.