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Dick Cheney and the Worship of Torture

The Will to Bend and Break

by THOMAS LARSON

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“I knew what I was doing,” Harry Truman said after the atomic bombs he ordered dropped not once but twice on Japanese cities—140,000 people dead in Hiroshima *that night*; 80,000 three days later in Nagasaki; many thousands more, slowly of radiation sickness. “I have no regrets,” Truman boasted. “Under the same circumstances, I would do it again.”

This, too, was Dick Cheney’s response to December’s Senate Torture Report. It’s “full of crap,” he said. About the program’s infamous twelve enhanced interrogation techniques, he said they were “authorized and approved.” He, like Truman, has “no regrets.” Given the chance, he’d “do it again.” And, he claimed, he hadn’t done anything that hadn’t already been done to the 3000 who died and the thousands who were terrorized on 9/11. (Of all the potential spokespeople for the Bush regime’s torture program—Powell, Rice, Rumsfeld, Ashcroft, and others—only Cheney manned up for the interview rounds, framing the debate *his way*: the program worked.) Underneath his justifications we hear Orwell’s double-speak. Cheney’s certainly not the first to twist the language as an argumentative tool.

“Making all-out war saves Americans lives,” General Curtis LeMay said following the Tokyo saturation bombing of March 9/10, 1945, the firestorm incinerating more than 100,000 civilian lives. Much later, in a moment of clarity, he added, “If we’d lost the war, we’d all have been

prosecuted as war criminals.” Americans have a genius for these prevarications. “The U.S. bomber is the most humane of all weapons.” “We must destroy the village in order to save it.” “Work on the dark side, if you will.” “Gitmo saves lives.” Down the marbled hallways of CIA headquarters in Langley, you hear echo, “The lawyers all signed off. So, too, the attorneys general. There’s no time for an ethical debate.”

It’s well to remember that the United States is a signatory of the United Nations Convention Against Torture. Its definition begins “Torture is any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession.” Violations of these protocols *should* result in criminal prosecution.

For the torturer, the practice is as much physical as psychological. You promise an agonizing death and deliver blows that fall just short of that finality. Impending attack at Antietam or on the beaches of Normandy is torturous. But the actual ensuing warfare ends with your death or your survival and, mercifully, the terror is over. The threat and the act of torture is true enslavement, as though you’ve signed an irrevocable contract. The horror is that it’s never over, that you are indefinitely detained and cannot leave the killing field.

Torture is not for the masses of soldiers or civilians. It’s done away from population centers—at black sites, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib. Treatment is individualized, like Winston Smith’s fear of rats in *1984*. Torture gains its power from being hidden, denied, misrepresented, and subject to the chain of command, despite international treaties and moral pledges. How, if it was so secret, did the U.S. treatment of al-Qaeda combatants in Guantanamo deter al-Qaeda combatants on the “battlefield”? Answer: it didn’t, and it wasn’t.

Bush and Cheney demanded the legalization of certain forms of torture to justify the invasion of Iraq and to link between 9/11 and Saddam Hussein. It was lawyered by “legal mercenaries” John Yoo and Jay Bybee in the “Torture Memos.” There, they argued that to qualify as being tortured victims must endure “intense” near-fatal experiences such as organ failure, brain damage, or broken limbs. Thus, lesser forms like enforced standing or waterboarding were allowed. Ostensibly the program was about getting “actionable” intelligence, which the Senate report said was unjustified and unnecessary. Why do it then?

In one sense, it’s the Bill Clinton defense: done because we can. In another sense, it’s done to prove, as Mark Danner posits, that the victim didn’t know what his interrogators had convinced themselves he did know. This is a strange idea. It says that the torturer is also a victim. He must learn he’s wrong when he doesn’t get the outcome he wants from the cattle prod. He must fail most of the time. Say, *that* didn’t work. Let me try again, a bit longer, harder, differently. With such a high likelihood of failure, the idea must be grounded in a lie, in denial, or in a sociopathic mindset. I think the latter gets it: the inability to feel others’ pain. Perhaps the inability to feel pain period. Which is where Dick Cheney and his heart enters in.

The torturer-in-chief indeed has a heart. It’s an organ assembled by modern cardiology. Many times over. Three heart attacks (1978, 1984, 1988) followed by quadruple bypass surgery. Another myocardial infarction, with coronary stenting, during the 2000 Florida recount. Six

months later, Cheney was implanted with a cardio-verter defibrillator. (No trouble during his VP reign.) A fifth heart attack came in 2010 when he was fitted with a left ventricular assist device, a computerized blood-pumping turbine, called the “gear.”

These feats of medical science add up to resurrection. Cheney is unlike most heart patients who, after so many attacks, should have died. He suffered but he didn’t expire. He’s unkillable, a kind of bizarre fitness torturers seek in their subjects. Indeed, Cheney’s deathlessness undergirds his persona. If you listen to any reporter-cowling interview he’s ever given, you’ll feel his armor, the model prisoner, impervious to interrogation. Like some suburban vampire, Cheney appears robotic, the epitome of the “undead.”

Deathless? Resurrected? Words we associate with Cheney’s opposite, Jesus Christ, and what the telling of his crucifixion has taught us about suffering. First, we need to rethink the origin of this origin tale. It is rooted not only in the Bible. In fact, if all we had to go on was the Bible, we wouldn’t *know* Jesus’ pain. Christ’s death, as gloriously painful as it’s supposed to have been, harvesting centuries of repentance, is rendered *passively*: “they crucified him” “that he might be crucified” “he was crucified.” Jesus seems to have been as pious in life as he was in dying. Such poor reporting is one reason for the bloodlust of Mel Gibson’s *Passion*.

But we do feel the crucifixion, thanks (if that’s the right word) to filmmakers, writers, and painters. For example, in Matthias Grunewald’s 1512-1516 Isenheim Altarpiece. There, on the cross, the slumping tautness of the body’s muscles, the ribs bulging under the evaporating skin, reveals the sting of his three-day expiration. His nailing-up was murderous, during which, presumably, he lost consciousness and died.

This death is the core myth of the Jesus propagandists: Christ died for our sins. And the cross, its commemoration everyone is forced to remember. Yet, in *God Is Not Great*, Christopher Hitchens proposes that Jesus did not die for our sins or our benefit. “The action of a man who volunteers to die for his fellow creatures,” Hitchens writes, “is universally regarded as noble. The extra claim not to have ‘really’ died makes the whole sacrifice tricky and meretricious. . . . Those who say ‘Christ died for my sins,’ when he did not really ‘die’ at all, are making a statement that is false in its own terms.”

His death was not death and his suffering was not torture. Compared to those in Andersonville or Bergen-Belsen, compared to thousands of altar boys repeatedly penetrated by the filthy members of Roman Catholic priests, Christ’s pain was real but brief. Six hours. Taken down, he rose. He walked on water. He ascended. He sits next to God. He became God. He made out. That’s not death. That’s a reward of sorts.

The point—torture is death’s opposite. Torture is a paradox—dying while not dying, the seeming or promised liberation of an end, never arriving. Dead, the pain is—or should be—over. Not so in Christian hell. You are killed again and again. Your punishment is to be resurrected in death so death becomes an eternity spent dying. While alive, you try to outlast your torturer. If you do, you are redeemed. This is the lesson of Louis Zamperini in *Unbroken* or Primo Levi in *Survival in Auschwitz*: they faced it, stay focused, got stronger in spirit as the flesh withered, and, years later, could say, each alone, with some luck, was responsible for his endurance.

And, as I said, torture is redemptive for the interrogators. The act of being waterboarded (Abu Zubaydah, 83 times; Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, 183 times) or electrocuted, sleep-deprived or isolated in darkness, bathed in ice water or mock-executed, redeems the war criminals who practice the art. How? Next time, *your* friendly bully announces, I'll hold back. I'll do only so much. But remember, I could always do more. Way more. I'm sparing you the worst, believe me. I'm letting you live. Letting you live is the cessation and reinvigoration of torture. It's a gift. Holding back, he self-anoints and parlays his "humanity." No wonder victims side with their oppressors.

From where does such a system stem? From religion, from religious institutions, from Jews and Christians and their ordinances. (I realize there is more to religion than my damnation of their violent origins. My point is to reinterpret the core myths and show that the victims' suffering has been *ordered*.) Torture, religions argue, is what God commands, what God employs, most often, willy-nilly. Isaac's head on the block; Job's body smote with boils; Jesus' bloodletting on the cross. And note what's common to all three:

- a) God the father orders it and intervenes to stop it only when the ghastliness is felt by the victim as abject abandonment;
- b) each man, bewildered by why he has to suffer such wrath, believes he has done something to deserve it;
- c) religions built on these spectacles place torture at the center of their narratives; those who create and follow the story must worship its creators and followers.

More about the three: Abraham (who hears voices in his head and is convinced of divine agency), Job (whose fate is a roll of the dice, a wager, from God to Satan), and Jesus (whose father has piled on, and Christians believe this literally, the sins of all previous, current, and subsequent human beings so that Jesus, his son, forever feels those sins in some timeless *burn* while he's nailed up, which is judged a good thing because such endless agony is proof of God's love.) Abraham, Job, and Jesus seem childlike to me—in accepting the Father-God's reasons even though they know, they *must* know, the wrong being done to them.

What's striking here is that these three are not enemy combatants. They are the so-called beloved charges of a paternal authority who justifies his action on the suspected failure of his subjects' faith: they've not been faithful enough; they've sinned; and they need to be called out. And this even though each, prior to the fall, we are told, evinces exemplary faith. Like Job of whom God, his torturer, first said to Satan, "Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?" Like Billy Budd who shouts to the man who decrees he must hang, "God bless Captain Vere." None groks why he's been singled out and blames his pride as the cause. To be saved, each one learns, is to have faith in the torturer's "good intentions" while his body rejects that explanation. Need we be reminded that these tests of belief form the foundational tales that mystify religious thinking.

Speaking of sustenance. Listen again to James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*, and the portion (I give just a taste of it from Part III) in which Father Arnall preaches to the boys

at Catholic school, “my dear little brothers in Christ.” First he gives an unctuously ceremonial pep talk, then for pages and pages, he hails with Ciceronian elegance, the mighty tableaux of ceaseless torment. For me, Joyce captures the *sound* of hell in Arnall’s voice and is worthy of the long quotation.

The torment of fire is the greatest torment to which the tyrant has ever subjected his fellow creatures. Place your finger for a moment in the flame of a candle and you will feel the pain of fire. But our earthly fire was created by God for the benefit of man, to maintain in him the spark of life and to help him in the useful arts whereas the fire of hell is of another quality and was created by God to torture and punish the unrepentant sinner. Our earthly fire also consumes more or less rapidly according as the object which it attacks is more or less combustible so that human ingenuity has even succeeded in inventing chemical preparations to check or frustrate its action. But the sulphurous brimstone which burns in hell is a substance which is specially designed to burn for ever and for ever with unspeakable fury. Moreover our earthly fire destroys at the same time as it burns so that the more intense it is the shorter is its duration: but the fire of hell has this property that it preserves that which it burns and though it rages with incredible intensity it rages for ever.

Hell: created by God to torture the unrepentant sinner. A fire that preserves what it burns. Only God in his supreme wickedness could devise such renewable terror—the apotheosis of penance.

We’re fond of saying that any garden-variety fascist has a heart as cold or as dead as Dick Cheney’s heart. I don’t think the simile works. His remodeled heart is anything but dead. It is dear to the jackal’s boot, to Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy,” “a love of the rack and the screw.” Torture is the brute’s love. Cheney’s ticker is warmed by the adrenalin he feels, impaling others. In his self-defense, Cheney always avoids invoking God: *he* wants the credit.

We can’t know for certain what Christ’s crucifixion was like, even though the four preferred gospel authors who weren’t there wrote the story of what happened anyway. Still, his conversion to sudden doubt may have merged loyalty and betrayal: so, he may have thought, my enduring *this* punishment is the road to father’s approval. This depravity and my willingness to take it is the key to knowing what the Sky God desires, the only way to praise him, praise worthy of him: I do as he says.

Indeed, I imagine (indulge me: this is a psychological scenario, not presented as fact) those post-9/11 nights of George W. Bush, worried sick that if he didn’t do as Cheney said, he, Bush, would invite another attack; he’d be wrong, weak, removed from office, snuffed out by a poison dart or a ricin-coated aspirin. Just a small vial of Cheney’s threat was inquisition enough for Bush to redeem himself and do as he was told. And Cheney, the wise torturer, redeemed him: *good* President. *You need not suffer.*

When you do *not* do as you’re told, you are complicit: you self-inflict; you prolong what you need not endure. This Cheney realized was Bush’s gutlessness, soon transformed into camera-ready grit, standing with bullhorn among the twin towers’ ruin. And isn’t that the ultimate weapon—to play your victim’s most vulnerable weakness (“I knew what I was doing”) so that you might bend him, like Christ in his toughest hour, to your will.

