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The Dark Core of the Empire

by Jacob G. Hornberger

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Among the major obstacles to both criminal prosecutions and a truth commission regarding the CIA's torture program is the underlying reluctance of U.S. officials to focus attention on the super-secret operations of the CIA.

A criminal prosecution, after all, could get out of control, especially one that is being prosecuted by a genuinely honest, independent prosecutor. Prospective defendants might threaten to reveal things that everyone would want to keep quiet.

At truth commission hearings, witnesses could slip up and disclose things that public officials hoped would be kept secret. Or disclosure of wrongdoing could invite retaliation by disclosure of other wrongdoing.

Given that the distinguishing characteristic of government is force, the CIA is the pure essence of such force. Here is where the federal government is able to initiate force with impunity. Through the CIA, it can kidnap, murder, assassinate, sexually abuse, torture, and steal, without accountability, liability, explanation, defense, justification, or even disclosure.

A good example was the CIA complicity in the murder of a young American journalist, Charles Horman, which I [wrote about yesterday](#). Although the U.S. government acknowledged that the CIA participated in that murder, has there ever been any grand-jury subpoenas or congressional subpoenas issued to the CIA agents who participated in that murder or who possibly issued the orders to do so? No. The Horman case is proof positive that at its core, the federal government is immune from acts of force initiated against others, citizen and noncitizens alike.

A more recent example involves the kidnapping by CIA agents of a man in Italy and his forcible transfer to Egypt for the purpose of torture. Although the CIA agents have been indicted in Italy and although there is an extradition treaty between Italy and the United States, U.S. officials have steadfastly maintained that the agents will not be extradited to Italy for trial.

It is impossible to know all of the horrific things that the CIA has done over the years, and the reason it's impossible is because the CIA is empowered to keep its operations secret from the American people. If there is any truth to Lord Acton's dictum that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely, then the CIA has got to be the most corrupt government agency in history, because its power is indeed absolute.

As the core of the U.S. Empire, the CIA is in fact the dark rot of the empire. No light is ever shined into its operations. Its agents can be ordered to initiate force against anyone anywhere in the world and, as we all now know, they will faithfully follow such orders without challenge or question, knowing that they will never be called to account for doing so, either criminally, civilly, or by Congress.

When I was growing up and learning about Nazi Germany, one of laments I often heard was, "How could the German people have let it happen?" The suggestion was that the German people were somehow different from other people in the world.

Nonsense. Human nature is human nature. How many Americans have demanded to visit the secret CIA prisons that have been situated in former communist countries? How many members of Congress have visited such prisons or even demanded the right to inspect them? How many American journalists have reported on what has gone on in those prisons? Of course, not that it would have made any difference anyway since the CIA would have blocked entry into its prisons.

But there's another reason that no one knows what has gone on inside those super-secret CIA prisons, one that is much more insidious: Americans just don't want to know what the CIA is doing and has been doing.

Long ago, the CIA and the American people, both directly and indirectly through their elected representatives in Congress, reached a tacit agreement. We'll give you omnipotent power to do whatever you think is necessary to keep us safe, but all we ask in return is that you keep what you do secret from us. We won't ask and we don't want to know.

The reason that criminal prosecutions or a truth commission into the CIA torture scandal are unlikely is because things could easily spiral out of control, permitting Americans to learn things about the dark core of their empire that they hoped would never enter their consciousness. Better to continue maintaining the darkness and the rot ... while keeping the core of the empire intact and operational, ready to be used when once again necessary.