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## America's Disappeared

By Chris Hedges

Jul 18, 2011

Dr. Silvia Quintela was “disappeared” by the death squads in Argentina in 1977 when she was four months pregnant with her first child. She reportedly was kept alive at a military base until she gave birth to her son and then, like other victims of the military junta, most probably was drugged, stripped naked, chained to other unconscious victims and piled onto a cargo plane that was part of the “death flights” that disposed of the estimated 20,000 disappeared. The military planes with their inert human cargo would fly over the Atlantic at night and the chained bodies would be pushed out the door into the ocean. Quintela, who had worked as a doctor in the city’s slums, was 28 when she was murdered.

A military doctor, Maj. Norberto Atilio Bianco, who was extradited Friday from Paraguay to Argentina for baby trafficking, is alleged to have seized Quintela’s infant son along with dozens, perhaps hundreds, of other babies. The children were handed to military families for adoption. Bianco, who was the head of the clandestine maternity unit that functioned during the Dirty War in the military hospital of Campo de Mayo, was reported by eyewitnesses to have personally carried the babies out of the military hospital. He also kept one of the infants. Argentina on Thursday convicted retired Gen. Hector Gamen and former Col. Hugo Pascarelli of committing crimes against humanity at the “El Vesubio” prison, where 2,500 people were tortured in 1976-1978. They were sentenced to life in prison. Since revoking an amnesty law in 2005 designed to protect the military, Argentina has prosecuted 807 for crimes against humanity, although only 212 people have been sentenced. It has been, for those of us who lived in Argentina during the military dictatorship, a painfully slow march toward justice.

Most of the disappeared in Argentina were not armed radicals but labor leaders, community organizers, leftist intellectuals, student activists and those who happened to be in the wrong spot at the wrong time. Few had any connection with armed campaigns of resistance. Indeed, by the time of the 1976 Argentine coup, the armed guerrilla groups, such as the [Montoneros](#), had largely been wiped out. These radical groups, like al-Qaida in its campaign against the United States, never posed an existential threat to the regime, but the national drive against terror in both Argentina and the United States became an excuse to subvert the legal system, instill fear and passivity in the populace, and form a vast underground prison system populated with torturers and interrogators, as well as government officials and lawyers who operated beyond the rule of law. Torture, prolonged detention without trial, sexual humiliation, rape, disappearance, extortion, looting, random murder and abuse have become, as in Argentina during the Dirty War, part of our own subterranean world of detention sites and torture centers.

We Americans have rewritten our laws, as the Argentines did, to make criminal behavior legal. John Rizzo, the former acting general counsel for the CIA, approved drone attacks that have killed hundreds of people, many of them civilians in Pakistan, although we are not at war with Pakistan. Rizzo has admitted that he signed off on so-called enhanced interrogation techniques. He [told Newsweek](#) that the CIA operated “a hit list.” He asked in the interview: “How many law professors have signed off on a death warrant?” Rizzo, in moral terms, is no different from the deported Argentine doctor Bianco, and this is why lawyers in Britain and Pakistan are calling for his extradition to Pakistan to face charges of murder. Let us hope they succeed.

We know of at least 100 detainees who died during interrogations at our “black sites,” many of them succumbing to the blows and mistreatment of our interrogators. There are probably many, many more whose fate has never been made public. Tens of thousands of Muslim men have passed through our clandestine detention centers without due process. “We tortured people unmercifully,” [admitted](#) retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey. “We probably murdered dozens of them ..., both the armed forces and the C.I.A.”

The bodies of many of these victims have never been returned to their families. They disappeared. Anonymous death is the cruelest form of death. There is no closure for the living. There is no way for survivors to fix the end of a life with a time, a ritual and a place. The atrocity is compounded by the atrocity committed against memory. This sacrilege gnaws at survivors. Regimes use clandestine torture centers, murder and anonymous death to keep subject populations off balance, agitated and disturbed. It fuels the collective insanity. The ability of the state to “disappear” people into black sites, hold them for years without charges and carry out torture ensures that soon these techniques will become a routine part of domestic control.

Tens of thousands of Americans are being held in super-maximum-security prisons where they are deprived of contact and psychologically destroyed. Undocumented workers are rounded up and vanish from their families for weeks or months. Militarized police units break down the doors of some 40,000 Americans a year and [haul them away](#) in the dead of night as if they were enemy combatants. Habeas corpus no longer exists. American citizens can “legally” be assassinated. Illegal abductions, known euphemistically as “extraordinary rendition,” are a staple of the war on terror. Secret evidence makes it impossible for the accused and their lawyers to see the charges against them. All this was experienced by the Argentines. Domestic violence,

whether in the form of social unrest, riots or another catastrophic terrorist attack on American soil, would, I fear, see the brutal tools of empire cemented into place in the homeland. At that point we would embark on our own version of the Dirty War.

Marguerite Feitlowitz writes in [“The Lexicon of Terror”](#) of the experiences of one Argentine prisoner, a physicist named Mario Villani. The collapse of the moral universe of the torturers is displayed when, between torture sessions, the guards take Villani and a few pregnant women prisoners to an amusement park. They make them ride the kiddie train and then take them to a cafe for a beer. A guard, whose nom de guerre is Blood, brings his 6- or 7-year-old daughter into the detention facility to meet Villani and other prisoners. A few years later, Villani runs into one of his principal torturers, a sadist known in the camps as Julian the Turk. Julian recommends that Villani go see another of his former prisoners to ask for a job. The way torture became routine, part of daily work, numbed the torturers to their own crimes. They saw it as a job. Years later they expected their victims to view it with the same twisted logic.

Human Rights Watch, [in a new report](#), “Getting Away With Torture: The Bush Administration and Mistreatment of Detainees,” declared there is “overwhelming evidence of torture by the Bush administration.” President Barack Obama, the report went on, is obliged “to order a criminal investigation into allegations of detainee abuse authorized by former President George W. Bush and other senior officials.”

But Obama has no intention of restoring the rule of law. He not only refuses to prosecute flagrant war crimes, but has immunized those who orchestrated, led and carried out the torture. At the same time he has dramatically increased war crimes, including drone strikes in Pakistan. He continues to preside over hundreds of the offshore penal colonies, where abuse and torture remain common. He is complicit with the killers and the torturers.

The only way the rule of law will be restored, if it is restored, is piece by piece, extradition by extradition, trial by trial. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, former CIA Director George Tenet, Condoleezza Rice and John Ashcroft will, if we return to the rule of law, face trial. The lawyers who made legal what under international and domestic law is illegal, including not only Rizzo but Alberto Gonzales, Jay Bybee, David Addington, William J. Haynes and John Yoo, will, if we are to dig our way out of this morass, be disbarred and prosecuted. Our senior military leaders, including Gen. David Petraeus, who oversaw death squads in Iraq and widespread torture in clandestine prisons, will be lined up in a courtroom, as were the generals in Argentina, and made to answer for these crimes. This is the only route back. If it happens it will happen because a few courageous souls such as the attorney and president of the [Center for Constitutional Rights](#), Michael Ratner, are trying to make it happen. It will take time—a lot of time; the crimes committed by Bianco and the two former officers sent to prison this month are nearly four decades old. If it does not happen, then we will continue to descend into a terrifying, dystopian police state where our guards will, on a whim, haul us out of our cells to an amusement park and make us ride, numb and bewildered, on the kiddie train, before the next round of torture.

