

Torture at Abu Ghraib followed CIA's Manual

THE PHOTOS from Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison are snapshots not of simple brutality or a breakdown in discipline but of CIA torture techniques that have metastasized over the past 50 years like an undetected cancer inside the US intelligence community. From 1950 to 1962, the CIA led secret research into coercion and consciousness that reached a billion dollars at peak. After experiments with hallucinogenic drugs, electric shocks, and sensory deprivation, this CIA research produced a new method of torture that was psychological, not physical -- best described as "no touch" torture.

The CIA's discovery of psychological torture was a counterintuitive breakthrough -- indeed, the first real revolution in this cruel science since the 17th century. The old physical approach required interrogators to inflict pain, usually by crude beatings that often produced heightened resistance or unreliable information. Under the CIA's new psychological paradigm, however, interrogators used two essential methods to achieve their goals.

In the first stage, interrogators employ the simple, nonviolent techniques of hooding or sleep deprivation to disorient the subject; sometimes sexual humiliation is used as well.

Once the subject is disoriented, interrogators move on to a second stage with simple, self-inflicted discomfort such as standing for hours with arms extended. In this phase, the idea is to make victims feel responsible for their own pain and thus induce them to alleviate it by capitulating to the interrogator's power. In his statement on reforms at Abu Ghraib last week, General Geoffrey Miller, former chief of the Guantanamo detention center and now prison commander in Iraq, offered an unwitting summary of this two-phase torture. "We will no longer, in any circumstances, hood any of the detainees," the general said. "We will no longer use stress positions in any of our interrogations. And we will no longer use sleep deprivation in any of our interrogations."

Although seemingly less brutal, no-touch torture leaves deep psychological scars. The victims often need long treatment to recover from trauma far more crippling than physical pain. The perpetrators can suffer a dangerous expansion of ego, leading to cruelty and lasting emotional problems.

After codification in the CIA's "Kubark Counterintelligence Interrogation" manual in 1963, the new method was disseminated globally to police in Asia and Latin America through USAID's Office of Public Safety. Following allegations of torture by USAID's police trainees in Brazil, the US Senate closed down the office in 1975.

After it was abolished, the agency continued to disseminate its torture methods through the US Army's Mobile Training Teams, which were active in Central America during the 1980s. In 1997, the Baltimore Sun published chilling extracts of the "Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual" that had been distributed to allied militaries for 20 years. In the 10 years between the last known use of these manuals in the early 1990s and the arrest of Al Qaeda suspects since September 2001, torture was maintained as a US intelligence practice by delivering suspects to foreign agencies, including the Philippine National Police, who broke a bomb plot in 1995.

Once the war on terror started, however, the US use of no-touch torture resumed, first surfacing at Bagram Air Base near Kabul in early 2002, where Pentagon investigators found two Afghans had died during interrogation. In reports from Iraq, the methods are strikingly similar to those detailed in the Kubark manual.

Following the CIA's two-part technique, last September General Miller instructed US military police at Abu Ghraib to soften up high-priority detainees in the initial disorientation phase for later "successful interrogation and exploitation" by CIA and military intelligence. As often happens in no-touch torture sessions, this process soon moved beyond sleep and sensory deprivation to sexual humiliation. The question, in the second, still unexamined phase, is whether US Army intelligence and CIA operatives administered the prescribed mix of interrogation and self-inflicted pain -- but outside the frame of these photographs. If so, the soldiers now facing courts-martial would have been following standard interrogation procedure.

For more than 50 years, the CIA's no-touch methods have become so widely accepted that US interrogators seem unaware that they are, in fact, engaged in systematic torture. But now, through these photographs from Abu Ghraib, we can see the reality of these techniques. We have a chance to join fully with the international community in repudiating a practice that, more than any other, represents a denial of democracy.

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