

Into the Abyss

A Study of American Torture, Power, and Impunity in Iraq

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Abstract

Revelations of abuse committed by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison in the spring of 2004 shocked the world, inciting protest against the American occupation of Iraq and sparking a fierce debate over the use of the use of torture by U.S. forces. This essay frames the assumption of American atrocities committed at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere in Iraq with the everyday realities experienced by American personnel on the ground. By way of this "bottom-up" approach a more holistic view of the factors that lead to the adoption of abusive practices is offered which balances the subjective experiences of soldiers with the role of formal policies in facilitating the slide into the "abyss." It concludes that not only were American excesses a formative part of the war but inseparable from the conflict itself-it is impossible to understand one without the other.

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“Winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people, one detainee at a time”

– Sign at Abu Ghraib prison¹

“I would like to share with you how one goes about becoming a concentration camp guard without ever having really made many decisions.”

– Chris Arendt of Iraq Veterans Against the War²

Interrogators at North Babel were ecstatic. Hours earlier they had been briefed about plans for an imminent raid on a terrorist training camp. This was by far the most sensitive and meticulously planned operation to which anyone at North Babel had been a part. Intelligence officials had collected high-resolution photographs that surveyed every inch of this clandestine redoubt. The brass estimated that if all went according to plan, the top leadership of the insurgency in al-Anbar would be apprehended, hence dealing a mortal blow to insurgent activities in the province. Around midnight, a Special Forces unit brought the first wave of

¹ Justine Sharrock, *Tortured: When Good Soldiers Do Bad Things* (Wiley 2010), 110.

² Chris Arendt, “Racism and War: the Dehumanization of the Enemy,” *Iraq Veterans Against the War*, <http://www.ivaw.org/blog/racism-and-war-dehumanization-enemy/chris-arendt> (accessed 20 Oct. 2012);

A Note on Titles Used: Many of the service members who appear in this essay are cited without the inclusion of their military rank or title. This is not meant as an affront to any soldier or the military. A considerable number of the documents used simply do not include these details. This is in no small part because of the painful nature of the topic itself, which lends itself to the desire for at least a modicum of anonymity. When titles are included they are used in the manner that their owner’s choose to identify themselves.

terrorists to the base. Sergeant Jones and the other interrogators moved frenetically, attempting to screen and prep each one for the interrogation booths as quickly as possible. An effusive Private Lagouranis carefully observed his first subject, a middle-aged man who had been badly beaten during the raid. Even sitting in his chair seemed too onerous a task for him, his face tensing as he struggled to cope with the pain of newly broken ribs and a smashed foot, which had hours ago been beaten with an ax by an overzealous Special Forces commando. Lagouranis' usual compunction about such treatment was lost, however. This time it was certain: they had the bad guys.

As the questioning dragged on, the initial excitement of the catch began to wear off. Shifting his interrogation strategy, Lagouranis asked the prisoners who they worked for. As'ad, one of the older prisoners, answered without hesitation, "The Ministry of Oil."³ Flustered, the interrogators began to quiz the others about their work and received the same answer from almost everyone. Putting together the pieces, they realized that the supposed terrorist training camp was actually a building used by the Ministry of Oil, and the alleged terrorists were guards whose role was to protect the post *from* insurgent activities. Despite this revelation, however, their commander's response was the same: keep on pressing, don't stop the heat. Their adamant plea to call the Ministry for the purpose of collating the prisoners' stories was just as emphatically refused. The stakes were just too high; how could they have messed up this badly? Eventually the unfortunate prisoners were released – that is, after the abuse had been dealt and a particularly unlucky member damned to the anonymous depths of Abu Ghraib prison.⁴

³ Tony Lagouranis and Allen Mikaelian, *Fear Up Harsh* (New York: Nal Caliber, 2007), 208.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 205-215.

As the experience of interrogators at North Babel reveals, America's war in Iraq, or as Iraqis refer to it, "the collapse," was borne out of a series of blunders and convenient falsehoods that eventually but painfully unraveled under an unforgiving Iraq sun.⁵ Upon entering Iraq, the United States boldly claimed that its exertions would herald a new era of freedom, peace, and democracy for the Iraqi people, before summarily occupying the same torture chambers and dungeons previously controlled by the oppressors whom they had just ousted.⁶ These and other fatal missteps, as well as attempts to rectify them, ultimately climaxed in instances of abuse and torture by American personnel against hapless Iraqis. The revelation of these acts became a powerful symbol of all that was wrong with this cursed war.

What only added to the weight of this monumental tragedy was, and continues to be, the collective refusal of Americans to come to terms with what transpired in the fetid prison cells and sunburned streets of Iraq. Immediately after the airing of the notorious Abu Ghraib prison photographs in the spring of 2004, administration officials successfully managed to steer public debate by framing abuses as unanticipated and episodic – the result of a handful of "bad apples." Ironically, many critics of American excesses asserted a counterargument of equally myopic scope, seeking to place the blame squarely on the backs of top officials. Such critics averred that secret executive policies were the chief impetus that had pushed soldiers towards these brutal and licentious acts. Since these initial revelations, however, many perceptive commentators have offered alternative theories for what transpired. Journalist Thomas Ricks, for example, posits that a lapse in military and civilian leadership was widely to blame.⁷ Others, such as academic Alfred W. McCoy, emphasize the role of the CIA in disseminating 'psychological' torture techniques,

⁵ Anthony Shadid, *Night Draws Near* (New York: Henry, Holt and Company, 2004), 332.

⁶ PBS Online, "Interview: Tony Lagouranis," *Frontline: The Torture Question*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/torture/interviews/lagouranis.html> (accessed 19 Oct. 2012).

⁷ Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2003-2005* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006)

as well as tensions within the American legal system that leave the status of these techniques ambiguous.⁸

While such accounts help explain why American excesses took place, their scope remains frustratingly limited and generally fails to take into consideration important factors specific to the context of Iraq. To a large extent, this is because most of the existing literature on U.S. torture, as well as other forms of abuse in Iraq, tends to assume a simple causal relationship between executive policy and the excesses that took place.⁹ A closer examination of both national and local policy-making, however, reveals what most soldiers would be the first to confirm – namely that political and military policies seldom materialized according to plan, this being especially true when it came to state-sponsored torture. Rather, to understand what happened at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere the quotidian realities and subjective experiences of Americans who engaged in abuse must be examined. And while several works have been published that are attentive to the day-to-day experiences of erring soldiers, these works, while illuminating, have tended to be anecdotal in nature.¹⁰ That is to say, while many of these works lucidly detail the realities of soldiering for those whose experiences they chronicle, most fail to convincingly elucidate the relationship between top-level policy and the eventual realization of abuse.

Lastly, the lion's share of these explanations continue to frame the use of torture as a merely an incidental, albeit formative, part of the war. In truth, American excesses and the use of torture, in particular, can only be understood as intrinsic to the conflict. It was through the tortured statements of prisoners such as Ibn al-Sheikh al-Libi, testifying to the presence of WMD in Iraq

⁸ Alfred W. McCoy, *A Question of Torture* (New York: Henry, Holt and Company, 2006)

⁹ Ibid.; Christopher H. Pyle, *Getting Away With Torture: Secret Government, War Crimes, and the Rule of Law* (Washington D.C.: Potomac Books Inc., 2009)

¹⁰ Sharrock, *Tortured*; Joshua E. S. Phillips, *None of Us Were Like This Before* (London: Verso, 2012)

and links with al-Qaeda, that the war was initially sold for public consumption.¹¹ Later, it was by the torture of innumerable persons that the war was prosecuted: first in search of elusive, i.e. nonexistent, WMD and terrorists; and later in a feeble attempt to disrupt a factionalized insurgency. In this case, historian-cum-psychologist Dave Grossman's assertion that atrocity is a "tiny microcosm of war," rings all too true.¹² For it was ultimately at Abu Ghraib prison, within the pockmarked walls of former Baathist haunts, and amongst lonely Forward Operating Bases that the same paranoia, hubris, and ignorance that spawned America's war found its highest expression in the twin evils of abuse and torture. In short, understanding the use of "enhanced-interrogation methods" and their progeny of horrors is inseparable from understanding the war itself.

And the stakes of this realization remain as high as ever. Dissembling narratives offered by Washington apologists and the collective amnesia of the American public has allowed for the same tensions that enabled the use of torture and the assumption of the war itself to remain unresolved. If the origins of this gratuitous misuse of power remain unexamined, these contradictions shall continue to fester, and the true nature and lessons of Iraq remain unabsorbed. Consequently, this essay seeks to frame the use of torture and ascent of abuse within the context of Iraq, understanding these phenomena as both inseparable components and logical mutations of the war. It also attempts, in particular, to illustrate how specific contexts, impediments, and conditions coalesced within the country, pushing normal Americans to engage in otherwise unthinkable acts, not merely a coterie of "bad apples."¹³ In order to achieve these goals, this study is built mainly on the personal accounts of those who witnessed or took part in them,

¹¹ Pyle, *Getting Away With Torture*, 17.

¹² Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Bay Back Books, 2009), 223.

¹³ Tara McKelvey, *Monsterring: Inside America's Policy of Secret Interrogations and Torture in the Terror War* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2007), 25.

adopting a bottom-up approach to the subject with an additional focus on the role of intelligence collection in the formation of a torture matrix.

It must be stressed that this study is not exhaustive but simply meant to discuss important shared experiences, hardships, and factors that facilitated the descent of good soldiers into what has too often been portrayed as incomprehensible license. It is also hoped that through this examination of American excesses the Iraq War itself, as well as several unresolved tensions and implications concerning American society, will be more clearly understood. What surfaces is a tragicomedy of epic proportions. Believing that they were bringing freedom to a beleaguered people, most American soldiers were dumbfounded by the resistance they encountered once in Iraq. These hapless soldiers felt betrayed by the Iraqi people, military leaders, and the vaunted promises of politicians. Within their unreality pressures mounted, pushing some to make those around them the object of their wrath – the Iraqi people. Yet, as this study reveals, in cases of abuse and torture there are always at least two victims.

Preparing to Fail

Upon arrival, most interrogators were subject to a rude awakening. The training they had received at the military's interrogation school proved to be utterly ill-suited to the war in Iraq. At Fort Huachuca the curriculum remained rooted in assumptions that were holdovers from the Cold War era. This meant that interrogators were versed in techniques appropriate for extracting tactical intelligence from large pools of POWS who were members of conventional armies, but completely inappropriate for eliciting it from members of a factionalized insurgency.¹⁴ And these problems appeared quaint in comparison to those faced by many of their peers. In desperate need of intelligence, the military pushed scores of personnel through crash-training courses, some less

¹⁴ Lagouranis and Mikaelian, *Fear Up Harsh*, 35; Chris Mackey and Greg Miller, *The Interrogators: inside the Secret War against al Qaeda* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2004), 34; Joshua E. S. Phillips, *None of Us Were Like This Before* (London: Verso, 2012), 169.

than two-weeks in duration, to up the number of interrogators and prison operators available.¹⁵ Flustered, confused, and under inexorable pressure to make sense of the chaos around them, they were essentially thrown into the wild and left to learn on their own. Under these unforgiving circumstances many started to improvise. They tried to find any method that would work, generally drawing upon preexisting notions of what effective interrogation looks like.¹⁶

These problems are observable in the memoirs of interrogator, Sergeant Chris Mackey*, whose account of his work in Afghanistan at the start of the Global War on Terror (GWAT) foreshadowed many of the difficulties faced by his colleagues in Iraq. His commentary on the evolution of interrogation techniques used in GWAT is particularly illuminating, not simply because of his analysis of their development, but because of the assumptions his account inadvertently reveals. Dismissing “the safe route as ineffective,”¹⁷ he endorses the use of sleep deprivation because, he claims, it is “common sense” that a person who is tired is “more prone to slip”.¹⁸ More disconcerting, however, is his appraisal of brute force as an effective means of extracting information. Mackey reasons that if “a prisoner will say anything to stop the pain, my guess is he will start with the truth.”¹⁹ His assessment of the use of coercive methods is intriguing and at points contradictory. While he personally objects to the use of most methods on moral grounds he professes faith in their efficacy, exhibiting an almost engrossed admiration for the possibilities they present while simultaneously evincing moral outrage at their use. In his

¹⁵ Phillips, *None of Us*, 97.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 94-97.

* Mackey’s account is pertinent for several reasons, not the least of which is the fact that several members of his interrogation unit eventually transferred to Iraq. One of his colleagues, Joe Rodriguez, who headed interrogation operations at Bagram during Mackey’s tenure in Afghanistan, was working at Abu Ghraib prison when the notorious photographs from there were released in the spring of 2004. In fact, Rodriguez testified in the investigative hearings that followed (Mackey and Miller, *The Interrogators*, 475). Many interrogators who worked with Mackey first cut their teeth in Afghanistan before heading to Iraq.

¹⁷ Mackey and Miller, *The Interrogators*, 285.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 288.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 477.

conclusion, Mackey tersely defends his faith in the “dark art”²⁰ with the perfunctory aside that “If coercion doesn’t work, why would the agency [the CIA] go to the trouble?”²¹

Sergeant Mackey’s faith in the efficacy of torture is of particular concern. Unlike so many of the other interrogators in GWAT, he was well-trained, having completed multiple interrogation training courses in both the United States and Great Britain. In short, if anyone should have understood the ineffectiveness of torture, it was him. His profession of faith in the “dark art” unveils the disturbing truth that even some of the best trained interrogators bought into the mystique of torture.

Darius Rejali, one of the world’s leading historians on torture, has commented rather revealingly that “Mackey seems unaware that even professional medieval inquisitors knew that repeated questioning during sleep deprivation guaranteed false information,” sardonically adding that “Only witch hunters favored sleep deprivation because it produced, to their mind, accurate accounts of pacts with the Devil.”²² In any case, one should not disparage Mackey too badly, as his candor alludes to another uncomfortable truth: most Americans were supportive of the use of “enhanced interrogation techniques” – an Orwellian euphemism for torture – in certain cases.²³ In truth, the use of torture by American interrogators is inexplicable unless one recognizes these two facts: one, a good number of personnel engaged in torture because they believed these acts were effective for securing valuable information; and, two, their logic was not borne of a deviant mind, but one firmly rooted in American society and its accompanying beliefs.

Looking at the statistical evidence available, it is apparent that a staggering proportion of U.S. citizens backed the use of methods designated torture under international law as the tragedy

²⁰ Ibid., xxii.

²¹ Ibid., 477.

²² Darius Rejali, *Torture and Democracy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), 511.

²³ McCoy, *A Question*, 110.

of the Iraq War unfurled. A skeptic might assail the notion that most Americans supported the use of torture by challenging the quality of polls or surveying techniques used to reach these conclusions. If one looks closely at the forms of questions posed or their official interpretation, however, it actually appears that when there was a bias in the surveys it generally had the effect of marginalizing the number of those who were supportive of the practice. To a large degree, this is because of commonly entertained misconceptions regarding what constitutes torture. A 2004 poll conducted by ABC News/ Washington Post, for example, found that 63 percent of Americans opposed “torture,” but that 66 percent of those surveyed supported the use of “sleep deprivation.”²⁴ Within the same survey 52% supported the use of “stress positions” and 54% supported the use of a “noise bomb.”²⁵ These findings lay plain the troubling reality that many Americans have an outmoded understanding of “torture,” one based on popular culture rather than legal or scientific norms. Thus while it is true that most U.S. citizens profess to not support the practice, this is to a large degree because most do not understand that psychological means of coercion – like sleep deprivation and stress positions – are in actuality just as brutal as “physical” torture and illegal under international law.²⁶

²⁴ Paul Gronke and Darius Rejali, with Dustin Drenguis, James Hicks, Peter Miller, and Bryan Nakayama, “U.S. Public Opinion on Torture, 2001-2009,” *Reed College Political Science Symposium*, July 2010, http://academic.reed.edu/poli_sci/faculty/rejali/articles/US_Public_Opinion_Torture_Gronke_Rejali.pdf (accessed Dec. 2012), 441.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 439.

²⁶ The use of so-called “psychological” techniques is no more effective than physical ones and is itself a misnomer. All forms of torture attempt to press the mind in a way that it will comply with the questions submitted by the torturer; thus, all torture is psychological. Eminent psychologist Uwe Jacobs, whose focus is therapy for torture victims, explains that “what all torture has in common, regardless of physical or mental appearances, is the assault on the brain. Indeed, to make a concerted assault on the brain is the primary aim of torture” (Uwe Jacobs, “Documenting the Neurobiology of Psychological Torture: Conceptual and Neuropsychological Observations,” *The Trauma of Psychological Torture*, ed. Almerindo E. Ojeda [Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2008], 165.). Since the mind’s functioning is inextricably linked to the wellbeing of the rest of the body, the physical-psychological dichotomy is inherently flawed. Consequently, the reverse is also true: all torture is physical.

Furthermore, since most of the ‘psychological’ methods used by U.S. forces are based on coercion through sensory deprivation, this further guarantees that bad intelligence will result, if given. Not only does sensory deprivation commonly result in hallucinations and permanent damage to the mental health of the victim, but if prolonged it results in death: “Under sensory deprivation humans are like fish on dry land and cannot survive” (*ibid.*, 166-7.). In other words, the victim’s frame of mind is so disturbed under psychological punishments that an honest

The ABC/ Washington Post poll is of particular interest because it was taken in the immediate aftermath of the Abu Ghraib scandal of spring 2004, during which the now notorious photographs of prisoner abuse first surfaced. Even after the airing of these macabre photographs the survey found that 57% of Americans were in favor of “hooding,” a classic means of sensory deprivation and, concomitantly, a favorite tool amongst practitioners of psychological torture.²⁷ One would think that if the majority of citizens were truly opposed to torture then the polls would have unequivocally reflected this position in the wake of the biggest torture scandal in recent times, if not U.S. history. A study conducted by faculty at Reed College on all major statistical data compiled between 2001-2009 on public support for torture – probably the most thorough assessment of such data – found that “if Americans think that ‘harsh interrogation’ simply means sleep deprivation and stress positions in extreme cases, they generally approve of it.”²⁸ With these considerations in mind, a skeptic would not be unfounded in suggesting that the manner in which these studies have been presented is often misleading. But, as deeper analysis reveals, these studies are usually misleading not because they over-represent the number of those who favor torture, but because popular interpretations have often had the effect of diluting these figures.

And while questions concerning the number of citizens supportive of torture are compelling they have had the inadvertent effect of overshadowing a more prosaic but far more pressing issue: the fact that most Americans believe torture works at all. In spite of an entertainment industry saturated in grisly images of interrogation or the erroneous logic

answer, or even a coherent one, is implausible. Such a frame of mind is completely ill-suited to any form of questioning. As this essay hopes to make clear, torture as an instrument of intelligence collection is not grounded in a sound scientific foundation but quite the contrary. It is not too bold to state that the quality of folklore and myths used to justify torture today do not significantly differ from those propagated since the practice began.

²⁷ “Most Americans reject torture but back some coercive practices,” *ABC News*, 2004, <http://abcnews.go.com/images/pdf/955a3Torture.pdf> (accessed Dec. 2012).

²⁸ Gronke and Rejali, “Public Opinion on Torture,” 440.

championed by public intellectuals like Alan Dershowitz, torture has repeatedly shown itself to be a deceptively hollow tool and, more often than not, categorically counterproductive.²⁹ There is simply no empirical evidence that convincingly proves that these coercive methods can be employed either effectively or systematically – least of all morally. In light of torture’s inherent inefficacy, questions concerning the number of Americans who support torture appear far less relevant than assessing number of those beguiled by torture’s mystique. For if these same people knew that the instrument of torture is not only brutal but, in fact, counterproductive, then the number of those who support its use would likely become inconsequential. Many Americans may take a belligerent stance on national security issues but these same hawks are far less likely to tolerate a policy that everyone knows is based on wives’ tales.

Since the vast majority of polls have found that most of the public (still) back certain varieties of torture it is safe to assume that most Americans believe in torture’s effectiveness.³⁰ It is also highly probable that a considerable number of those who oppose these abusive practices do so because of moral qualms while still entertaining illusions of their ability to achieve results. To state an obvious point, yet one laden with dire implications, not only do most citizens support the use of torture, but even more citizens continue to entertain illusions of its potency. Until the foolishness of pursuing these policies becomes common knowledge one can only expect that this most archaic, brutal and misguided of policies shall continue to be seriously entertained by politicians, citizens, and academics alike. Since it *is* a thoroughly counterproductive policy tool, however, it also follows that there is cause for optimism: if people knew that it does not work

²⁹ Alan Dershowitz, “The Case for Torture Warrants,” *Alan Dershowitz*, 2002, <http://www.alandershowitz.com/publications/docs/torturewarrants.html> (accessed Dec. 2012).

³⁰ Roy Eidelson, “How Americans Came to Support Torture, in Five Steps,” *Alternet*, 12 May 2009, http://www.alternet.org/story/139993/how_americans_came_to_support_torture_in_five_steps (accessed Dec. 2012); Amy Zegart, “Torture Creep: Why are more Americans accepting Bush-era policies than ever before?,” *Foreign Policy*, 25 Sept. 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/25/torture_creep (accessed Dec. 2012).

then support for the practice would likely dissipate. With these weighty considerations in mind, it is only appropriate to explain precisely why torture is ineffective and the arguments used to justify it deeply flawed.

Proponents of torture generally use arguments saturated with hypothetical details that prove fundamentally flawed when applied to reality. To be specific, an axiomatic supposition of torture apologists is that pain is a constant that can be manipulated. This is simply not true. As the body is inflicted with greater pain its ability to sense it actually declines. In other words, escalating the severity of techniques used does not necessarily result in more pain but, instead, the inability of the body to experience it.³¹ Not only is pain not a single commensurable unit, but the intensity with which people react to it varies significantly between persons.³² People who are ideologically opposed to their torturers tend to be the most likely to successfully resist pain. In other words, if the U.S. were to capture a genuine terrorist who is ideologically-driven, such a person would be the least susceptible to breaking down under coercive pressure. Another problem conveniently left untouched by proponents of torture is the general inability of people to distinguish false from true answers. Studies consistently show that interrogators are no better at doing this than the untrained, who generally fare no better than being right about half the time (as good as a blind guess) and, in fact, often fare worse.³³ And let us not forget that this is supposing that the subject *does* speak.

Dissecting these deeply significant but scarcely examined assumptions reveals a dangerous tendency on the part of torture advocates to espouse theoretical arguments – that have been repeatedly disproved in real life – under the banner of utilitarian realism. This propensity for donning fallacious abstractions in easily grasped realist argumentation has reached its apotheosis

³¹ Rejali, *Torture and Democracy*, 447.

³² *Ibid.*, 447-50.

³³ *Ibid.*, 463-66; McCoy, *A Question*, 194.

in the ticking-bomb justification.³⁴ According to adherents of the ticking-bomb rationale, torture is not only a necessary tool but can even reach the sublimity of a categorical imperative in the event that authorities capture a terrorist who knows of an imminent terrorist attack threatening thousands, even millions of people. One of the noticeable problems with this line-of-argumentation is its exceptionality. The argument is emotive precisely because it is immersed in hyperbole, conceptualizing a scenario that, were it not for 9/11, would appear juvenile if not crazy. Even if the scenario is to be considered charitably other problematic assumptions add yet more gaping cracks to the argument. To start, the ‘ticking-bomb’ scenario envisions not only that the government captured a terrorist conveniently holding the precise information which they lack yet need to know, but that the authorities are somehow certain the terrorist has exactly the right details they lack. How convenient. For the arresting authorities to somehow possess *all* relevant details about a future terrorist attack *except* for those held by the terrorist in their possession, and *then* for them to somehow know that this terrorist knows *precisely* the details they lack is to buttress the argument upon a crudely embellished hypothetical foundation lacking any semblance with the practical realities of law enforcement.

Alleged real world examples also leave something to be grasped. The practical example most frequently cited by Alan Dershowitz, amongst others, is the case of Abdul Hakim Murad, who planned to assassinate the Pope before bombing commercial airliners flying out of the Philippines.³⁵ What Dershowitz neglects to mention, however, is the fact that all the plot’s salient details were first learned by scouring Murad’s laptop, not through abusing him. And while is true that Murad was subjected to a torture regimen coercion failed to procure good information

³⁴ Dershowitz, “The Case for Torture,” *Alan Dershowitz*; Mark Bowden, “The Dark Art of Interrogation,” *The Atlantic*, Oct. 2003, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/10/the-dark-art-of-interrogation/302791/> (accessed Dec. 2012).

³⁵ McCoy, *A Question*, 112.

because the victim (yes, the authorities chose to make the terrorist a victim) simply mimed the ideas fed to him by interrogators. These answers, false though they were, were not easy coming either. In all, Murad was tortured over a period of sixty-seven days, a lengthy stretch that makes a mockery of the notion that torture can miraculously secure the ticking bomb's last details needed to avert imminent catastrophe. Instead of corroborating his views, Alan Dershowitz unwittingly pulls the rug out from under his own argument by citing the case of Abdul Hakim Murad. Use of these and similar contradictions may be considered typical for torture enthusiasts. Such contradictions underline a conspicuous absence of real-world evidence for propping up these dangerous theories, and general lack of sophistication – not to mention moral compunction – when it comes to discussions of torture and national security.

Yet the question remains as to why the American public continues to hold such sanguine views regarding the institution of torture. Darius Rejali explains that societal views of torture are commonly conditioned by fictional works of art or symbols that people come to collectively regard as fact. He cites the sociological process of “Misrecognition” or the habitual mistaking of one kind of situation as another; a process that “lies...just beyond consciousness” and occurs “because people are deeply invested in the particular way they think about themselves and others.”³⁶ Hence the ubiquitous “ticking bomb” rationale cited by Americans across the political spectrum was first contrived by Jean Lartéguy for his fictional work on the Franco-Algerian War, *Les Centurions*, and a litany of popular works that sprouted after 9/11 continue to expound on this emotive yet essentially fantastical casuistry.³⁷ Tony Lagouranis, an interrogator who operated in Iraq, has commented on Hollywood portrayals of interrogation with the frightening admission that although interrogators overseas “knew it was make believe...still, it affects

³⁶ Rejali, *Torture*, 546.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

you.”³⁸ He confided that “I would have liked to have been taught by that person,” the suave, self-assured interrogators on television. But in their absence he and his colleagues made do with what they had by choosing to “sit around...watch interrogators on TV.”³⁹ Perhaps the most telling statement, however, was that of Supreme Court Justice Scalia, who during a defense of the United States’ position on matters of torture and national security chose to cite a particular episode from the primetime television show *24*, in which information elicited from a tortured villain is used to prevent a terrorist attack on Los Angeles: “Jack Bauer saved Los Angeles...He saved hundreds of thousands of lives...Are you going to convict Jack Bauer? Is any jury going to convict Jack Bauer? I don’t think so.”⁴⁰

Recognizing that a considerable number of interrogators and other U.S. personnel in Iraq believed in the efficacy of torture, and that this faith was shared by greater American society, is vitally important for comprehending the use of torture after 9/11. For many Americans in Iraq—especially interrogators – at least initially, the use of coercive treatment was rooted in an assumed logic and morality of its own; not, as some would have us imagine, borne solely of some primordial irrationality or purely misanthropic intentions. Secondly, since these views were reflected and reinforced by American society neither the wrongs of soldiers nor the policies of top-level officials should be seen as having occurred within a vacuum. Instead, the belligerent views of Americans of all stripes who supported the use of so-called enhanced interrogation techniques must be understood in light of preexisting popular beliefs concerning torture, and the ascendance of these previously latent ideas in the aftermath of 9/11.

Searching For Answers

³⁸ Phillips, *None of Us*, 97.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 102.

Believing in the efficacy of coercion and lacking a set of operating principles that appeared to work, military personnel involved in intelligence collection began to improvise, devising a policy “made out of desperation.”⁴¹ In the words of one disenchanted interrogator, they were “literally just trying something new and hop[ing that] it works.”⁴² Under intense pressure from superiors to extract good information, soldiers intuited techniques for use in the interrogation booth, drawing on preconceived notions of what effective interrogation looks like.⁴³

For some, the adoption of coercive techniques was seen as a perfectly natural extension of practices taught to them in training. Others voiced more reservations against their adoption, eventually justifying their use – mostly to themselves – by means of elaborate philosophical somersaults. In some cases, a first-generation of abusive soldiers gravitated towards aggressive tactics only after having first expressed misgivings about them, eventually descending into a downward spiral in which one’s compunction was lost and abuse became commonplace.⁴⁴ For this first-generation of abusers, the appropriation of abusive techniques was sometimes a painful and introspective process. Yet, when succeeded by new unit – a potential second-generation of abusers – it was not unusual for the incoming unit to believe that the escalated techniques practiced by outgoing peers were the norm. In such cases, the new unit would often take up these methods with “alacrity,” seeing them “not as a method of last resort...but as a primary option.”⁴⁵

A common and novel justification brandished by first-generation abusers, in particular, was that the aggressive techniques they were implementing were no different than “corrective

⁴¹ Lagouranis, *Fear*, 36

⁴² Phillips, *None of Us*, 94.

⁴³ Rejali, *Torture*, 547.

⁴⁴ McKelvey, *Monsterring*, 36-46; Emma Brockes, “What happens in war happens,” *The Guardian*, 2 Jan. 3009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/03/abu-ghraib-lynndie-england-interview> (accessed 4 Nov. 2012).

⁴⁵ Mackey and Miller, *The Interrogators*, 476.

training” meted out by their own superiors to erring subordinates.⁴⁶ This justification was especially cited during instances in which prisoners were subjected to “compulsory physical training,” which often included “smoking,” military parlance for push-ups, and other forced rigorous activity at unendurable levels.⁴⁷ Iraq War veteran Jonathan Millantz explains that “Basically the same things we did to those people in Iraq were the same things that were done to us and taught to us.”⁴⁸ Having bought into the logic of coercive force, American personnel looked for methods that appeared innocuous or were easily rationalized, most often for the sake of their own conscience. In their desperation to find effective techniques, it makes sense that many Americans drew from experiences in boot-camp and, more generally, the military culture in which they were operating.

It also appears that in some instances the misuse of “corrective training” amongst military personnel presaged its use on detained Iraqis. That is to say, the abuse of U.S. personnel by U.S. personnel in certain units foreshadowed abuses to come against Iraqi civilians by members of these same units.⁴⁹ Sergeant Camilo Mejía, whose unit operated in the Sunni Triangle shortly after the initial invasion, writes that the punishment of soldiers was oftentimes “vindictive” and amounted to little more than “breaking the kid down” for one’s sadistic pleasure.⁵⁰ That these punishments were tolerated by the military even when used prejudicially makes the military’s tolerance of abuse against Iraqis – wielding methods based on those used by officers on their subordinates – more explicable. Mejía writes that the acceptance of these forms of punishment

⁴⁶ Camilo Mejía and Chris Hedges, *The Road to ar Ramadi: The Private Rebellion of Staff Sergeant Mejía: An Iraq War Memoir* (New York: New Press, 2007), 24.

⁴⁷ Mejía and Hedges, *The Road to ar Ramadi*, 26; U.S. Senate. Committee on Armed Services. *Inquiry Into the Treatment of Detainees in U.S. Custody*, 20 Nov. 2008, http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/Publications/Detainee%20Report%20Final_April%2022%202009.pdf (accessed 6 Nov. 2012), 210.

⁴⁸ Phillips, *None of Us*, 58.

⁴⁹ Mejía and Hedges, *The Road to ar Ramadi*, 24.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

were such that when he hesitated to use them on his men a commanding officer told him to “put a little more testosterone into your leadership style.”⁵¹ He was even snubbed by colleagues after reporting the illegal use of such treatment by an officer against a soldier who was not under his command.⁵² While an assessment of the prevalence and misuse of “corrective training” within American units goes beyond the scope of this study, it is clear that its application to Iraqi detainees was a widespread phenomenon.

The sometimes absurd lengths to which an ambivalent first-generation of interrogators went to rationalize their gradual appropriation of coercive techniques is recorded in Sergeant Mackey’s account. Pressed for intelligence but initially repulsed by the use of sleep-deprivation, Mackey ordered his interrogation team to only deprive prisoners of as much sleep as they concurrently deprived themselves. Who could operate on less sleep thus became a battle of wills between the interrogator and unwilling prisoner. Equally bizarre were occasions in which his team sought to achieve the same results of sleep deprivation – or, the self-described “euphemism” of “adjusted sleep routine” – by reading books loudly in the presence of prisoners, or encouraging them to fill out tedious Red Cross forms in order to placate their own misgivings.⁵³ Ironically, after having adamantly defended the supposedly scientific foundations of sleep-deprivation Mackey notes that during a particular interrogation his own lack of sleep impeded his ability to recollect cogent details offered by prisoners, explaining that “Some details have a way of dissolving when you have bags under your eyes.”⁵⁴ Elsewhere he states that it was not uncommon for MPs have to “prod interrogators awake in the middle of interrogation”

⁵¹ Ibid., 27.

⁵² Ibid., 34-5.

⁵³ Mackey and Miller, *The Interrogators*, 272, 289.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 428.

because of the long hours they were pulling.⁵⁵ During one such instance he grew “intensely frustrated with one prisoner who refused to answer any of my questions,” only to have an MP explain to him that he had been posing his questions in English instead of Arabic to the bewildered prisoner.⁵⁶

After reading about his team’s own forgetfulness and unprofessionalism one is left wondering how it was possible for Mackey and his colleagues to believe so adamantly that sleep deprivation would lead to the obtainment of accurate or even coherent answers. The glaring omission of a single instance in which verifiable answers were obtained from prisoners subject to a sleep-deprivation regimen is perhaps the greatest testament to this disconnect. In reviewing the text, however, two compelling explanations arise concerning their seemingly uncritical faith in sleep-deprivation and other extralegal methods like stress-positions. The first is the fact that Mackey and his team were products of a society in which the efficacy of torture was assumed by a considerable majority, as affirmed and expounded in popular culture. Finding that prescribed methods did not seem to work, they drew upon preconceived ideas concerning interrogation, many of which were rooted in popular cultural forms. For example, in one instance a befuddled Mackey decides to try out a method observed in a Humphrey Bogart film during a training exercise after all other methods had failed.⁵⁷ Instead of expressing regret at having to take a number from Bogart, he is positively exuberant, praising his ability to adapt under pressure. Colonel Britt Mallow of the Criminal Investigation Command (CID) investigated American abuse in Afghanistan at the same time as Mackey’s tour and concluded that “I think some of the experimentation came from folks who thought it worked in other places... ‘I’ve seen this stuff

⁵⁵ Ibid., 235.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 47.

portrayed in other places. I've read about it. I've heard about it. I've seen it in movies... Why shouldn't we give this a try."⁵⁸

The second rationale, and one explicitly cited by Mackey, is that coercive techniques must be effective since the Other Government Agency (a widely used name for the CIA in Afghanistan and Iraq) were using them.⁵⁹ This justification merits special attention since it was widely cited by military interrogators, sometimes as the main reason for their faith in the efficacy of torture or why they had chosen to appropriate similar techniques. Many service members believed that CIA officials were more knowledgeable than themselves in matters of interrogation, feeding a sense of inferiority already amplified by a lingering self-consciousness of their poor training. This made them eager to glean all they could from these self-assured and oftentimes pompous agents. Yet, behind the facade of omniscience lay a paper tiger. Contrary to popular belief, the CIA was totally unsuited to act as the lead agency in overseeing the apprehension and interrogation of suspected terrorists and insurgents in GWAT. As a FBI agent explained, during the Cold War the CIA seldom interrogated more than the rare spy or Soviet defector, meaning that they were basically unversed in routine interrogation procedure.⁶⁰ When granted the lead in GWAT, the agency found itself "searching for effective techniques," and because of their inexperience were "floundering for a while."⁶¹ In the immediate aftermath of 9/11 the agency did not even have a trained corps of interrogators, forcing it to turn to private contractors and frantically commence a program meant to rapidly turn-out a new generation of

⁵⁸ Phillips, *None of Us*, 79, 86.

⁵⁹ Mackey and Miller, *The Interrogators*, 477.

⁶⁰ McCoy, *A Question*, 119.

⁶¹ Ibid.

interrogators.⁶² Milt Bearden, a former senior CIA official, framed the matter more bluntly: “There is no reserve within the CIA of experienced, trained interrogators. There never was.”⁶³

In other words, bungling CIA interrogators were improvising interrogation methods, exhibiting the same self-delusion, ineptitude, and cluelessness of their peers in the conventional military – and with whom they collaborated.⁶⁴ The difference, however, was that they had considerable latitude with which to concoct their macabre schemes as well as access to Cold War-era interrogation manuals that described coercive techniques in lewd detail.⁶⁵ Within Iraq, the practical consequences of collaboration between conventional military forces with CIA agents proved to be devastating. The discrepancy between regulations guiding the conduct of these shady operatives and those sanctioned for normal military personnel became blurred, their collaboration setting into motion a series of unintended consequences. Among these terrible consequences were the dissemination of coercive methods amongst soldiers and the fortification of their faith in the applicability of torture. These events were ironic, and tragically so, since many of the military interrogators who were deceived by the absurd logic espoused by CIA agents were themselves more experienced and knowledgeable about interrogation matters.

This spill-over of ‘tricks and of the trade’ was a powerful phenomenon and does much to explain the dissemination of similar coercive practices between disparate units, organizations, and countries.⁶⁶ Devilishly complicated, this web of torture techniques and folklore may never be completely unraveled, but its genesis certainly involves more individuals and institutions than the CIA. In the context of Iraq, Special Forces were granted a different set of rules for

⁶² Associated Press, “CIA Lacked Trained Interrogators,” *NBC News*, 12 May 2004, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4964993/ns/world_news-mideast_n_africa/t/cia-lacked-trained-interrogators/#.ULK2L4ZoWSo (accessed 1 Nov. 2012).

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ McCoy, *A Question*, 137; Seymour Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 61.

⁶⁵ McCoy, *A Question*, 92-4.

⁶⁶ Mackey and Miller, *The Interrogators*, 287.

interrogations that allowed for the use of aggressive techniques beyond those sanctioned for use by conventional forces. These included “stress positions, loud music, light control, isolation, allowing a minimum amount of time for sleep, and military working dogs as techniques authorized for use in interrogations,” among other degrading practices that were not officially sanctioned but tolerated – if not encouraged – by superiors.⁶⁷ This first set of Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for U.S. Special Forces in Iraq reveals an intimate connection between officially sanctioned methods of coercion in Afghanistan and Iraq, as the SOP in Iraq was “verbatim” to the SOP approved for Special Forces in Afghanistan the previous year.⁶⁸ Apparently, commanders in Iraq simply decided to switch the letterhead of these SOPs. It was not long after these permissive regulations were adopted that collaboration between the Special Forces and members of the conventional military occurred. This collaboration spawned confusion over what set of rules applied and, furthermore, facilitated the spread of aggressive techniques.⁶⁹

It was in the transposition of practices used in Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE)⁷⁰ training to the interrogation booths of Iraq that the thematic concepts previously described are best elucidated. Ill-trained, beguiled by the mystique of torture, and frantic for actionable intelligence, American personnel and policymakers at all levels came to accept the necessity and morality of coercive force. Many of them hastily improvised means with which to extract desperately desired intelligence. In September 2002, the Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff – who had no experience in the field of interrogation – decided to explore the application of

⁶⁷ U.S. Senate. Committee on Armed Services. *Inquiry Into the Treatment of Detainees*, 162.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁷⁰ Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE) is a training program offered to elite military personnel, private military contractors, and key civilians in the Department of Defense. Administered by the Joint Personnel Recovery Agency (JPRA), it is meant to instill skills deemed necessary for operating in exceptionally dangerous circumstances. This essay focuses on torture techniques used in controlled conditions during the “Resistance” phase of SERE training. The “Resistance” phase is supposed to teach American personnel methods for resisting torture if apprehended by an abusive enemy. As this essay explains, these controlled torture exercises were inappropriately transferred from a training environment for actual use in the interrogation booths of Iraq (for use in real, as opposed to simulated, interrogations).

techniques drawn from SERE's controlled torture scenarios for use by interrogators at Guantanamo Bay.⁷¹ Criminal Investigation Task Force (CITF) officials were aghast that SERE techniques were being applied to prisoners. Top Navy psychologist Mike Gelles explains that, "That's not what they were designed for...But because they were techniques used to train people to resist, they figured, 'We know that people from our experience get pretty stressed out doing this... We know this works.'"⁷²

About one year later, a team of Joint Personnel Recovery Agency (JPRA) instructors were dispatched to Iraq. Their team leader Lieutenant Colonel Kleinman was under the impression that they were only there in an advisory capacity, not to introduce methods derived from SERE training.⁷³ That Kleinman's team even aspired to act in this limited capacity strikes one as strangely incongruous, seeing as no member of his team had previous experience in performing actual interrogations. Even so, he expressed the opinion that the Special Force's dearth of intelligence was most likely due to poor screening, in other words, simply imprisoning the wrong people.⁷⁴ Once there, however, his team was told that they were "cleared hot" to engage in "the full range of JPRA methods," which included "walling, sleep deprivation, isolation, physical pressures...space/time disorientation, [and] white noise."⁷⁵ Appalled, Kleinman asserted that this "was an unlawful order" and he "wasn't going to have any involvement in it."⁷⁶ Despite his protests, several other members of his team assisted in the torture of Iraqi prisoners before the entire team abruptly left the country – in part, because Special Forces members had warned

⁷¹ Phillips, *None of Us*, 76.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷³ U.S. Senate, Committee on Armed Services, *Inquiry Into the Treatment of Detainees*, 170-1.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 180.

Kleinman to “sleep lightly” since they did not support those who “coddle terrorists.”⁷⁷

The transposition of SERE practices to the interrogation booths of Iraq poignantly illustrates the ill-informed and extemporaneous character of the American torture experiment both in Iraq and elsewhere. People with no practical interrogation experience, or training for that matter, were at all levels attempting to devise a coherent strategy for amassing useful intelligence. Acting on conjecture and intuition, and in a desperate bid to make of the most out of an already impossibly muddled situation, they sought to apply SERE practices entirely inappropriate for real interrogations. Their foray in Iraq foreshadowed the subsequent mission of General Geoffrey Miller later that year. An artillery specialist who was currently overseeing the detention center at Guantanamo Bay – in spite of his lacking any training in the field of interrogation – the crusty General advised his colleague, General Janet Karpinski, to “treat them [the prisoners] like dogs. If...they believe they’re any different than dogs, you have effectively lost control of your interrogation from the start.”⁷⁸ The maelstrom of the Abu Ghraib scandal would challenge the sagacity of this advice. As JPRA leader Lieutenant Colonel Steven Kleinman later reported to Congress, American personnel “followed their professional instincts” in the absence of good training, and “When presented with the choice of getting smarter or getting tougher...chose the latter.”⁷⁹

The choice of SERE techniques, in particular, underlines how American personnel at all levels were ludicrously ill-informed and beguiled by the mystique of torture. If its adherents were more knowledgeable about the history and purpose of SERE they might have voiced more reservations about the adoption of its techniques. Initially based on a study conducted about how

⁷⁷ Ibid., 186.

⁷⁸ Pyle, *Getting Away With Torture*, 49.

⁷⁹ Associated Press, “Officer: Military Demanded Torture Lessons,” *CBS News*, 11 Feb. 2011, http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-224_162-4476962.html (accessed 27 Oct. 2012).

Communist soldiers extorted *false* confessions from American POWs during the Korean War, the program is meant to teach soldiers how to *beat their interrogators*, not cooperate with them.⁸⁰ That members of the military seized these techniques with alacrity is thus a prime indicator of the gross level of ignorance and ill-preparedness that permeated its ranks. It also illustrates the startling extent to which decisions made at both the top and bottom of the military were improvised, based solely on intuition or hearsay. And that these methods are torture is not in doubt. During the Cold War, SERE's methods were colloquially referred to as the "Communist Interrogation Model," a compendium of torture practices that were thought to be used by the worst human-rights violators in the world.⁸¹ This means that the U.S. military quite literally, albeit unwittingly, chose to appropriate for itself its own perception of absolute evil and depravity – the self-described worst of the worst. In this light, interrogator Tony Lagouranis' laconic observation rings eerily true: "To the humble and simple, we were just the new Saddam."⁸²

The Descent

For most Americans, stepping into Iraq might as well have been touching down on Mars. The foreignness of their environment was magnified by a cultural-linguistic chasm that proved unbridgeable, and only widened as tensions mounted during the rise of an insurgency in the summer of 2003.⁸³ These developments were incomprehensible for the majority of soldiers who had been told that they would be entering as heroes, but now appeared to be attacked by the very people whom they were sent to save. Haunted by an invisible and unrelenting enemy, many

⁸⁰ Pyle, *Getting Away with Torture*, 55; Spencer Ackerman, "SERE, CIA, and Stress Positions as Sleep Deprivation," *The Washington Independent*, 29 April 2009, <http://washingtonindependent.com/41155/sere-cia-and-stress-positions-as-sleep-deprivation> (accessed 2 Nov. 2012).

⁸¹ Associated Press, "Officer," *CBS News*

⁸² Lagouranis, *Fear*, 77.

⁸³ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 215.

Americans chose to make the local people the object of their wrath. What followed within the miasma of Iraq was a culture of abuse and degradation whose justness was self-evident amongst those who found themselves damned to its darkest depths, while appearing bestial and incomprehensible to an American public uninitiated in its terrible logic.

In order to scrape the surface of these combatants' heart of darkness, elemental factors specific to the 'Iraq context' of the war must be examined. While much attention has been paid to the role of the legal sophistry of top policymakers in facilitating abuse, the amount of scholarship paid to variables specific to Iraq is comparatively anemic. As we will see, however, abusive behavior by American personnel, including that linked to the interpretation of the administration's legal innovations, cannot be explained apart from the environment in which they occurred. Preeminent among these variables was an impenetrable cultural-linguistic barrier that precluded genuine relations between U.S. troops and Iraqi citizens, an impossible physical environment and, lastly, the nature of work delegated to these soldiers and fatal assumptions that encumbered them.

Welcome to Mars

The Iraq War illustrates in gruesome detail just how dangerous ignorance can be. Sent to wage a fight they were not trained for – and, one anchored and prosecuted upon a series of falsehoods – soldiers grew stupefied if not enraged. What mercilessly perpetuated and compounded these problems, however, was ignorance itself, a startling and sometimes shameless ignorance of the people they were ostensibly sent to save. Ultimately, this unforgiving ignorance not only fundamentally undermined prospects for peace, but was paramount in facilitating the dehumanization of Iraqis in the eyes of embittered American soldiers. This indifference, if not contempt for Iraqis, vastly greased the way for torture and abuse.

That these barriers to mutual understanding were formidable is tragically illustrated in the military's feeble attempts to teach soldiers about Iraqi culture and history. Intended to provide a bridge between cultures, these attempts instead betray the fact that a startling ignorance of Iraq shaped the actions of those at the top as much as it did the actions of the average soldier. Former interrogator Tony Lagouranis wrote that lessons intended to enlighten American personnel about their new environment more often than not amounted to "racist bullshit" lectures.⁸⁴ Most were based on orientalist literature long-discredited by academics, but since appropriated by U.S. decision-makers who regarded these works as authoritative.⁸⁵ In lectures with such spurious titles as "The Arab Mind," soldiers were taught that Arabs were intrinsically different from themselves. Morsels of disinformation included admonitions to be careful around Iraqis since "They don't think linearly or rationally," and "Lying is not taboo or dishonorable to Arabs."⁸⁶ The experience of Mario Mihauchich, a tank gunner during the initial invasion, testifies to the prevalence of these misconceived ideas. He stated that "the most significant thing that [his instructor] ever told us was that Arabs lie. 'That's what we do... Straight up to your face.' He says, 'They'll come and shake your hand during the day, and shoot you at night.'"⁸⁷ While Mihauchich did not perceive anything unusual about these lessons Lagouranis bemoaned their effects, explaining that "while the intention of the lecture was to help us appreciate this alien culture and work with it, the effect it had was to reinforce prejudice and give many soldiers an excuse to give up on ever understanding or improving Iraqi society."⁸⁸ An especially common belief was that the Iraqis were fatalists conditioned by a regressive culture of despondency,

⁸⁴ Lagouranis, *Fear*, 17

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 17-18; Hersh, *Chain of Command*, 39.

⁸⁶ Lagouranis, *Fear*, 17.

⁸⁷ Trish Woods, *What Was Asked of Us: An Oral History of the Iraq War by the Soldiers Who Fought It* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006), 37.

⁸⁸ Lagouranis, *Fear*, 18.

hence failing to take the initiative or recognize opportunities presented by the invasion. This typical view was articulated by Major Brian Bresnahan, a Marine whose unit was stationed at Camp Taquddum just outside of Fallujah, and who claimed that “You have to understand the Arab mentality: everything happens because of God’s will. If Al Qaeda comes to my village, it’s God’s will.”⁸⁹

Thus fortified, the linguistic-cultural chasm became only greater once in Iraq, the inability of Americans to communicate with Iraqis oftentimes serving to confirm their prejudices instead of dispel them. That the difference in culture was a “psychological factor” of enormous import is noted in the General Taguba’s seminal report on detainee abuse, whose accompanying psychological evaluation of U.S. forces warned that a lack of cultural sensitivity and anti-Islamic bigotry “exaggerate differences and create misperceptions that can lead to fear or devaluation of people.”⁹⁰ The process and effects of this phenomenon is eloquently described by anthropologist Pilar Calveiro, who notes in ‘Torture’s New Methods and Meanings’ that “The U.S. and its allies face an Other in the Arab World that is radically different. This, on one hand, facilitates the act of dehumanizing him; but, on the other hand, it makes it very difficult to know him and, consequently, to control him.”⁹¹ The result was a positive-feedback loop of sorts; American soldiers’ interactions with the Iraqis resulting in the augmentation of ignorant or bigoted views and the introduction of new barriers to mutual understanding instead of their reconciliation.

Awab al-Rawe, an Iraqi student at the University of Oregon who spent the first years of the war watching his country being torn to pieces, believes that the “little things,” or thoughtless

⁸⁹ Carl Mirra, *Soldiers and Citizens: An Oral History of Operation Iraqi Freedom from the Battlefield to the Pentagon* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 100.

⁹⁰ Lieutenant General Anthony Taguba, “Article 15-6 Investigation of the 800th Military Police Brigade,” in *The Torture Papers: The Road to Abu Ghraib*, ed. Karen J. Greenberg and Joshua L. Dratel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 438, 448.

⁹¹ Pilar Calveiro, “Torture’s New Methods and Meanings,” in *On Torture*, ed. Thomas C. Hilde (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 126.

mistakes made by the occupying troops, generally had a noxious effect that resonated beyond their immediate impact.⁹² He notes that “Most interactions [between troops and Iraqis] happened during raids,” a situation in which tensions were already heightened, making the effect of any sleight all the more intolerable.⁹³ An affront that Awab recalls with special clarity is when soldiers pinned citizens to the ground with their boots. Besides being universally cruel, this act has added significance in the Middle East since “most Middle-Eastern cultures consider a shoe to be a disrespectful thing...if you put him on the ground and put your shoes on top of his head, that’s actually really, really bad...No matter who he is, we don’t do that. And that has really made a lot of Iraqis feel disrespected by the military.”⁹⁴ Another common area of interaction between soldiers and Iraqis was the streets, and, as Awab remembers, the exchanges that occurred here were often only slightly more congenial than those which took place during house raids. While security declined in the years following the invasion, the wariness of Americans towards Iraqis intensified: “there was a sign on every single military vehicle that if you are not – first it was ten, then it was twenty-five, now it’s one-hundred meters – away from the vehicle, you will be shot.”⁹⁵ Thus an irrepressible fear born and fed by ignorance impeded U.S. personnel from conducting the most basic operations without alienating local Iraqis. And as if to make such misunderstanding all but inevitable, resentments between Americans and Iraqis were stoked by the very work with which soldiers were tasked – work that was incendiary by nature and whose component tasks betrayed an inexcusable lack of tact by those at the top.

This concatenation of cross-cultural misunderstanding and alienation is also observable in the interactions of U.S. interrogators with Iraqi detainees, which betrayed a startling ignorance of

⁹² Awab al-Rawe and Jonathan Ng, interview at the Mills International Center, University of Oregon, 16 Jan. 2013.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

the most basic aspects of Iraqi culture. When Najeeb Abbas Shami, a city counselor from Karbala, was imprisoned, he learned that he was being held on the painfully implausible charges of being “an Islamic militant, a spy, and a Ba’athist.”⁹⁶ Upon hearing the charges he could not help but laugh, dumbfounded by the nonsensicality of being held as a suspected “Islamic militant and a Ba’athist.”⁹⁷ This, however, was lost on his captors, who proceeded to torture him, releasing him weeks later only to be re-arrested for shipment to Abu Ghraib.⁹⁸ Tragically, the absurdity of the charges leveled against Shami were no by no means exceptional, the majority of interactions between captor and captive being characterized by the risible if not pernicious obtuseness of American personnel.

Recalling a colleague who once left the middle of an interrogation to ask him “What’s the Ba’ath Party?”, Lagouranis wrote that the cultural-linguistic ignorance of Americans, himself included, fundamentally undermined the ability of interrogators to operate and paved the way for abuse.⁹⁹ He noted that it was not uncommon for soldiers to imprison Iraqis simply because they had the same tribal name as a wanted person, or a name that carried negative connotations with U.S. troops like ‘Jihad’ or ‘Jaish’.¹⁰⁰ Even when discounting American unfamiliarity with the social dynamics of the country, the language divide alone constituted a barrier of inestimable consequence. This is lucidly illustrated in the writings of Moazzam Begg, who was abducted from his house in Pakistan to spend several years languishing in various American prisons. Begg recalled that his fluent command of English stunned his captors and forced his guards to recognize his humanity. Consequently, his captors treated him relatively well even while they were mistreating other non-English speaking prisoners whose humanity was easier to deny:

⁹⁶ Phillips, *None of Us*, 148.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 148-9

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁹⁹ Lagouranis, 103.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 75; Also see Ricks, *Fiasco*, 214-297.

“over the months...I saw Cody [the guard] become desensitized, and accept the demonizing process of regarding us as subhuman. He always treated *me* well, but then I was easy to get on with.”¹⁰¹ One guard explained the necessity of this barrier for enabling abusive behavior, saying that “I convince myself each day that you guys are all subhuman – agents of the Devil, so that I can do my job. Otherwise I’d have to treat you like humans”.¹⁰²

And as previously noted, even the most innocent episodes of miscommunication could snowball into problems of profound consequence. In his book, *Fear Up Harsh*, Private Lagouranis recalls an instance in which a group of Iraqis with fresh American bullet wounds arrived at his prison seeking compensation, but were instead arrested, the guards reasoning that “They’re wounded, so they must be involved in something.”¹⁰³ This ignorance and prejudice defined the most quotidian of decisions made by prison staff, it not being uncommon for missteps like the decision to shave prisoner’s heads and beards – against the religious requirements of many Muslims – or other affronts, like the exhibition of an Israeli flag, to be made unwittingly or otherwise by soldiers.¹⁰⁴ Since the simplest interactions between U.S. personnel and Iraqis were devilishly complicated by an enduring cultural-linguistic divide, it is perhaps not too daring to aver that the American project in Iraq was doomed to fail at the start. Or as Lagouranis put it, U.S. forces “fucked the Iraqis over with our arrogance and incompetence.”¹⁰⁵

Sergeant Chris Mackey, whose experience in Afghanistan foreshadowed that of his compatriots in Iraq, summarized this problem in his reminiscences of his tour of duty: “I thought

¹⁰¹ Moazzam Begg and Victoria Brittain, *Enemy Combatant: My Imprisonment at Guantanamo, Bagram, and Kandahar* (New York: The New Press, 2006), 125.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁰³ Lagouranis, *Fear*, 76.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 115; Mackey and Miller, *The Interrogators*, 456; Begg and Brittain, *Enemy Combatant*, 112.

¹⁰⁵ Lagouranis, *Fear*, 147.

about whether our efforts... had been hindered by our barely passable understanding of the enemy's culture... All that was only just dawning on us, and we were getting ready to leave."¹⁰⁶ Begg's sentiments mirror Mackey's but are all the more vivid, having come from the opposite side of the wire. His thoughts speak to the deep psycho-spiritual turmoil experienced by prisoners who found themselves in a world without discernible rules or reason, and completely of their captors' own making. To them, their fate seemed to be woven into a nightmarish hallucination come to life, Begg describing their Kafkaesque existence as "funny if it hadn't been so terrifying, being in the power of people who actually believed their own fantasies."¹⁰⁷

It is significant that interrogators as well as the majority of U.S. actors at all levels were, one, educated only in the particular cultural nuances deemed necessary for their specific line of work; and, two, educated in these matters through a lens not indigenous to Iraq, but constrained by American preoccupations. In other words, their education was meant to teach them not so much about Middle Eastern values as propagate a distorted view of the Middle East that conveniently conformed to the interests and prejudices of those holding the reins of power. Naturally this had a marked effect on their assessment of the context in which they were placed. Thus, Lagouranis recalls that during his studies at the military's Defense Language Institute in Monterey, the head of his department upon rhetorically asking him what is the "difference between this book [the Koran] and the Bible," responded that "There is no love in this book. At all."¹⁰⁸ While his Arabic class watched the bombing of Baghdad on television, his stout Coptic teacher was "beside herself," exhorting the Americans to "Kill them! Kill them all!" Lagouranis assuring us that "She hated all Muslims."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Mackey and Miller, *The Interrogators*, 451.

¹⁰⁷ Begg and Brittain, *Enemy Combatant*, 153.

¹⁰⁸ Lagouranis, *Fear*, 18-19.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

Sergeant Mackey's account too illustrates how interrogators' politically-tinted lenses profoundly affected the way in which they engaged the indigenous populace. Upon being asked by a prisoner how he thought the prisoners view him, he delivers an alarmist response that betrays a hyperbolized understanding of the enemy: "Sometimes I think I can almost see how much they hate me... A few of those guys really hate us. Most of them do, I guess."¹¹⁰ He further elaborates that while he does not hate them "as individuals" he "sometimes [becomes]...worried about the global conspiracy of what's happening. You see how widespread this shit is and you get to thinking it's pretty damn huge and pretty much everywhere."¹¹¹ The effects of this reactionary view were most poignantly illustrated during an episode in which his unit translated an al-Qaeda guide for resisting interrogation. Mackey is flabbergasted by the accuracy of its content pertaining to American methods of interrogation, writing that its "core diagnosis was dead-on."¹¹² Yet, instead of attempting to understand the ideology articulated in the manual, or assess the verity of its main points – among which is the assertion that "they [the Americans] will not understand our reasons [for fighting], and you must contrive to exploit their ignorance" – he questions the apparent docility of U.S. techniques in comparison to those used by other Middle Eastern governments, wishing that he could be more aggressive.¹¹³

The effects of this bigoted, politically-constrained vision of the Middle-East crystallized in the use of torture techniques customized to exploit the preoccupations of Islamic societies – that is, what Americans themselves believed to be the preoccupations of Muslims*. A popular view

¹¹⁰ Mackey and Miller, *The Interrogators*, 449.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 181.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 180.

* While most Americans believed that the exploitation of supposed Islamic phobias was a recent innovation, it is not. Marnia Lazreg's study of French torture used in the Franco-Algerian War shows that attempts by non-Muslims to exploit perceived Islamic sensibilities were common amongst French interrogators (Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire*, 123).

shared and transmuted between policymakers and soldiers was that “one, Arabs only understood force and, two, that the biggest weakness of Arabs is shame and humiliation.”¹¹⁴ These views were shared by General Geoffrey Miller, whose advocacy of the use of dogs to General Ricardo Sanchez was not only meant to scare Muslim detainees but offend their religious beliefs, since dogs are considered to be unclean animals by some Muslims.¹¹⁵ By the same line of reasoning, male prisoners were commonly forced to strip in public areas and inspected by female personnel. U.S. interrogators believed that prisoners’ supposedly unnatural preoccupation with being naked amongst other people, especially women, would help soften them up for questioning.¹¹⁶

However, it is hard to imagine that the response of Americans would have been at all different if subjected to the same degrading treatment. Prisoners were terrified by vicious animals not because of an unusual aversion to them but because of an all too understandable fear of being attacked. Likewise, it is difficult to imagine that the response of anyone abducted and forced to strip in the presence of others could be anything other than a deep sense of personal violation. In short, the gross ignorance of American personnel was determinative, affecting all facets of their experience in Iraq. Barriers to understanding facilitated the dehumanization of Iraqis in the eyes of American soldiers and undermined the ability of troops to successfully carry-out their work. Finally, this ignorance was exemplified in the creation of torture regimens that reflected and reaffirmed American prejudices towards the local populace.

Courting Death under a Red Hot Sun

While a cultural-linguistic chasm heightened perceived differences between American personnel and Iraqis, facilitating the latter’s dehumanization, it must be emphasized that it was under a blistering sun and the palpable threat of death that most abuses occurred. If the cultural

¹¹⁴ Hersh, *Chain of Command*, 39.

¹¹⁵ Pyle, *Getting Away with Torture*, 48.

¹¹⁶ Mackey and Miller, *The Interrogators*, 259.

environ in which U.S. soldiers found themselves thrust was foreign and baffling, their physical surroundings and work were equally brutal and unyielding. The incredible strain created by the combination of these factors served to deepen the divide between American personnel and the Iraqis amongst whom they operated, in some cases resulting in episodes of abuse.

Marine Infantryman Jason Smithers' recollections of his tour of duty portray how environmental, occupational and social tensions coalesced, leading some Americans to indiscriminately demonize Iraqis: "As soon as we stepped off the bus, instantly the humidity...you're fucking sticky and sweaty, the smell of shit all around you, trash everywhere...They were just dirty, dirty fucking people, mugging you, giving you dirty looks when you're over there to help them. Immediately I didn't like the place at all."¹¹⁷ Though he tried to play "it cool, you know, hearts and minds...I didn't like them immediately because of the way they treated us when we were trying to help them. They didn't give us a chance."¹¹⁸ Smithers grew embittered by the apparent hostility of the locals he was trying to help, causing him to see these people as enemies or, at best, calculating ingrates. In his own words: "We thought about how much we hated being there and how much we hated the people that were over there because we were trying to help them and they were treating us this way – killing our friends. They don't follow laws of war or anything, so we just hated them, pretty much. It's all everybody talked about all night."¹¹⁹

Unable at times to engage in the most basic of human exchanges within a literally sweltering environment, it is understandable that some soldiers came to see Iraqis as hostile agents or cruel appendages of their harsh surroundings. Each local came and, to an extent, had to be seen as a potential enemy, their individuality lost in a sweltering sea of intolerable humanity.

¹¹⁷ Wood, *What Was Asked of Us*, 155.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 157.

Private Joshua Key explained that, “Because our enemy remained invisible, our fears, and frustrations mounted, but we could always take those frustrations out on civilians.”¹²⁰ American soldiers were operating in excruciating heat with little or no sleep, and haunted by the never-ending dread of being killed at any moment. Even when soldiers harbored no particular animus against the locals, these physical stresses could be so overwhelming that they pushed individuals or whole units to the brink: “Everything built up. One way to explain it is that some people have really bad tempers and it’s really hot and you start getting really pissed and you’ll snap on anybody for anything.”¹²¹

The experience of Sergeant Mejía in ar Ramadi attests to the central role of the physical environment and its concomitant pressures in eroding the respect and patience American soldiers had for Iraqi locals. After performing crowd control for an anti-occupation protest, he writes that his tense and sleep-deprived unit was willing to snap at anything. Upon seeing a suspicious looking teenager, his friend Chito decided to slam the boy into the wall. Though Mejía “felt sorry for the kid and part of me wanted to tell Chito to let him go...I couldn’t. I was angry at everyone and everything.”¹²² During another patrol in which he writes that “the heat was really getting to us”, he recalls that his commander decided to imprison a young child for throwing a rock at the group: “I’m gonna take this little motherfucker to the base and I’m gonna arrest him...That’s the only way these kids are ever going to learn to not throw rocks at us.”¹²³ Luckily, his commander eventually came to his senses and let the boy go, but not before terrifying the entire community. Mejía’s account conveys a sense of permanent tension, himself admitting that “Things got to the

¹²⁰ Joshua Key and Lawrence Hill, *The Deserter's Tale: The Story of an Ordinary Soldier Who Walked away from the War in Iraq* (New York: Grove Press, 2007), 94.

¹²¹ Wood, *What Was Asked of Us*, 158.

¹²² Mejía and Hedges, *The Road to ar Ramadi*, 92.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 123.

point where I could no longer relax unless I was out on mission. Back at base I constantly anticipated disaster or even death.”¹²⁴

A Human Rights Watch report on the excesses of the 82nd Airborne Division in Fallujah, or “the Murderous Maniacs” as they were known by the locals, describes in great detail how abuse occurred under these combustible conditions.¹²⁵ Soldiers confessed that Iraqi prisoners, or “Persons Under Control,” were routinely abused not only “as a means of intelligence gathering” but also “for stress relief,” one American explaining that “Everyone in the camp knew if you wanted to work out your frustration you showed up at the PUC tent.”¹²⁶ The document also articulates several reasons why this treatment was sustained and normalized. In violation of “army doctrine,” prisoners were oftentimes not sent to the “rear,” meaning that the very soldiers who had just come out of the heat of battle were the same soldiers responsible for overseeing them: “we would place him under the guard of soldiers he had just been trying to kill.”¹²⁷ By far the greatest problem, however, was the criminal failure of commanders of all stripes to regulate this behavior and provide clear boundaries of conduct. An anonymous West Point graduate explained that they “were never briefed on the Geneva Conventions” and he was under the impression that the Conventions did not apply until he heard Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld claim otherwise in the wake of the Abu Ghraib scandal – on television.¹²⁸ Perplexed, he sought the opinion of a Judge Advocate General’s Corps (JAG) lawyer, who explained to him that, “Well the Geneva Conventions are a gray area.”¹²⁹ While not as oblique as the lawyer’s

¹²⁴ Ibid., 140.

¹²⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Leadership Failure: Firsthand Accounts of Torture of Iraqi Detainees by the U.S. Army’s 82nd Airborne Division*, (New York, 2005), 1.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 15-16.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 18.

response, the Secretary of the Army also failed to assuage the soldier's concerns, assuring him that as far as abuse was concerned, "We've solved that matter."¹³⁰

It is important to note several additional characteristics specific to the duties demanded of the average soldier that vastly aided this slide into abuse. On patrols or manning checkpoints, soldiers were under unceasing stress that eventually coalesced in a reactionary siege mentality. Every person or thing had to be seen as a possible threat, meaning that an impenetrable barrier, sometimes physical but oftentimes psychological, was erected between Iraqis and Americans. This amplified a sense of difference and, in heated moments, animosity between the troops and an Iraqi populace expunged of all normal human attributes in the minds of eternally preoccupied personnel. Scott Ewing, who was an army scout at Tel Afar, said that this constant fear prompted his unit to distribute candy to kids while on patrol, so as to use them as a "human shield" and discourage attackers.¹³¹ Another veteran, Kelly Dougherty, noted how this siege mindset shaped official policy, as convoy drivers were not to stop for any reason even if this meant running over children: "People get run over all the time and you are basically told not to stop."¹³²

These statements allude to two other problems with the U.S. military presence in Iraq. The first is that in all wars leadership caricaturize the 'enemy' in order to galvanize troops for action and assure them of the justness of their cause. Yet, in the case of Iraq, false and incendiary statements made by top officials were generally so ambiguous or misleading that most soldiers were not entirely sure who the enemy was – a confusion that was further complicated by the eventual realization that the initial justifications for entering Iraq were almost all entirely wrong. Later, this confusion was mercilessly compounded by the rise of a widely misunderstood

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Scott Ewing, "Racism and War: the Dehumanization of the Enemy," *Iraq Veterans Against the War*, 13 March 2008, <http://www.ivaw.org/blog/racism-and-war-dehumanization-enemy/scott-ewing> (accessed 17 Oct. 2012).

¹³² Mirra, *Soldiers and Citizens*, 46.

insurgency whose tenacity dumbfounded policymakers and grunts alike. In the midst of their perplexity, it is understandable that bewildered soldiers projected their frustrations on the only other beings visible – normal Iraqis – especially since, in their minds, it was only because of their succor that the insurgency continued to thrive. Second, American personnel were tasked with an impossible job. Quelling insurgent activities while restoring the country’s political, economic and civil institutions were Herculeaneum tasks for the military, or any organization for that matter. The use of the military in Iraq was ultimately an inappropriate and incommensurate response to a misperceived problem that was, in reality, an American-made chimera. U.S. Soldiers who sensed the futility of their efforts grew even more demoralized and bitter, leading some to take out these frustrations on unfortunate locals.

All in a Day’s Work

For interrogators and prison personnel specifically, these pressures coincided in similar ways, but with important distinctions. General Taguba’s report states that the “quality of life for soldiers assigned to Abu Ghraib [prison]...was extremely poor,” soldiers living an almost surrealist existence within an antiquated labyrinth of cells and holding-pens regularly targeted by mortars.¹³³ This “besieged, sweltering, stinking, hell-hole,” and, as it so happens, the center of prison operations in Iraq, at its peak faced the impossible prisoner-to-guard ratio of seventy-five to one.¹³⁴ Medic Andrew Duffy described his experience there by stating simply, “I don’t see how you could live at Abu Ghraib...and not be pissed off every day.”¹³⁵ While facing many of the same frontline stresses as other soldiers, interrogators and prison personnel were specifically delegated the task of handling those who were suspected of being the source of their problems.

¹³³ Taguba, “Article 15-6 Investigation,” 433.

¹³⁴ Mark Danner, *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror* (New York: New York Review Books, 2004), 32.

¹³⁵ Sharrock, *Tortured*, 118.

In effect, this created a real ‘ticking bomb’ problem, it being only a matter of time before an incensed soldier made some luckless prisoner the object of his or her wrath. This abuse regularly materialized as a form of retribution for attacks against U.S. forces. But it also occurred, especially after the compunction of tormentors was lost, as a way of relieving any sort of anger. Veteran Tony Sandoval framed this bizarre dilemma: “You have to watch these prisoners – they’re the reason why you’re in the damned country. They’re the reason why you’re miserable. And you have to babysit them.”¹³⁶ It was even not unheard of for soldiers who were disgusted by the gratuitous behavior of their peers to mistreat prisoners because they felt deeply disillusioned with the corrupted-character of their environment.¹³⁷

Besides living under perpetual fear of death and the torment of innumerable stressors, the very nature of the interrogators’ and prison operators’ work smoothed the way for the destruction of their internal equilibrium and subsequent mistreatment of prisoners. Mackey wrote that interrogation is “debilitating work...in its own way” because it requires the interrogator to “engage in cynicism, dishonesty, and deception in quantities that would be considered pathological in the real world, day after day.”¹³⁸ These sentiments are seconded by Lagouranis who believes that the engrained assumptions of U.S. interrogators, as well as those axiomatic to the field of interrogation, predisposed personnel to mistreat prisoners: “We were talking about

¹³⁶ Phillips, *None of Us*, 63.

¹³⁷ Sharrock, *Tortured*, 128; These observations help contextualize an oft heard explanation for the assumption of abusive behavior, namely that soldiers participated because they were ‘bored’. This explanation is more misleading than it is edifying. For soldiers who were inappropriately tasked with overseeing prisoners and originally expected to see combat, abusive activities imbued them with a sense of purpose while concurrently allowing them to release the frustration of being tasked with a difficult, thankless job for which they had not signed up. One soldier explained that “When the tangible was happening [acts of abuse] it felt good,” “it” allowing him to feel as if he was finally doling out justice to the “bad guys” (Phillips, *None of Us*, 63.). Simply put, the ‘boredom’ explanation must be qualified by the smoldering fears, resentments, and disaffection of American personnel – often with the nature of the work itself. This included disillusioning second-thoughts about the very purpose of the war or its prosecution. Soldiers became increasingly disabused of the lies first sold to them, angered by the careerist machinations of superiors, and unable to convince themselves that their presence was doing any good for America or Iraq (Mejía and Hedges, *The Road to ar Ramadi*, 176.).

¹³⁸ Mackey and Miller, *The Interrogators*, 231.

how to most fully break a man, which is something extreme and implicitly violent, and then we learned about the restraints and the limits. It was only natural for me, and many others, to imagine what was on the other side of those limits.”¹³⁹

While under this terrible weight, interrogators who believed in the efficacy of torture, that is to say, a considerable number, felt hamstrung. As explained in part one, many of them adopted coercive but deceptively innocuous techniques with which they believed subjects could be more easily ‘broken’. Another problem was invariably encountered, however, since many prisoners still did not ‘break’ even after being subjected to these grueling punishments. Instead of eroding interrogators’ faith in the reliability of torture these failures generally strengthened it. Having all along suspected these tactics to be sanitized half-measures, they perceived their failure as a vindication of the suspicion that more force needed to be applied to have an appreciable effect on their work.¹⁴⁰ Otherwise, they reasoned, their methods would merely be piecemeal and contradictory. These fears were shared by Lagouranis, who recounted that “Most prisoners were terribly confused and very annoyed by what we did, but hardly pressed to the breaking point. We’d tried to fit a set of tactics meant to be brutal into a set of regulations established to force us to be humane.”¹⁴¹ Some interrogators were even plagued by the fear that because they were ‘only’ using torture-lite methods they would appear docile, even impotent in front of subjects whom they believed to be hardened fighters who may have endured harsher forms of punishment at the hands of oppressive Middle-Eastern regimes.¹⁴² For conventional forces, these fears appeared to be given further credence when an unresponsive subject had previously been incarcerated at a Special Forces prison, since the Special Forces were known to have even greater latitude in

¹³⁹ Lagouranis, *Fear*, 39.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 50-1; Phillips, *None of Us*, 59.

¹⁴¹ Lagouranis, *Fear*, 118.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 95.

handling prisoners.¹⁴³ If spectacular methods were not used on these prisoners, so the reasoning went, they surely would not speak, having been supposedly inured to the harsher methods used by their previous captors. What these soldiers did not know, however, was that people under the threat of torture generally underestimate their ability to withstand pain.¹⁴⁴ This means that once punishment is administered they may actually become emboldened, choosing to continue resistance since they have become more fully aware of their own capacity to withstand abuse or feel that at that point they have less to lose.

This slide into abuse accompanied a corresponding deterioration in professionalism and the type of intelligence sought. Lagouranis wrote that he “remembered a point of time back in Mosul when our jobs became more about securing confessions and less about gathering intelligence. Along with that fundamental shift in purpose came a fundamental shift in tactics. That’s about when we started torturing people.”¹⁴⁵ This confession-centric approach to interrogation was also observed by Torin Nelson, an experienced interrogator who was alarmed by similar developments at Guantanamo Bay. He reported that poorly trained interrogators thought that if they secured a confession from a prisoner “that [meant] that the person is actually broken, that they can just extract all the information they want from him.”¹⁴⁶ In truth, confessions are generally of little to no intelligence value since they usually do not contribute to the answering of greater tactical or strategic questions. Furthermore, subjects who are reluctant to confess may be willing to discuss other intelligence questions of even greater import that do not implicate themselves. Confession-centric interrogations signaled a decline in professionalism that in the

¹⁴³ Mackey and Miller, *The Interrogators*, 114; Lagouranis, *Fear*, 120.

¹⁴⁴ McCoy, *A Question*, 90-1.

¹⁴⁵ Lagouranis, *Fear*, 176.

¹⁴⁶ Phillips, *None of Us*, 169.

most extreme cases progressed to the use of torture as an “end unto itself”.¹⁴⁷ Merle L. Pribbenow, former head of the CIA’s Directorate of Operations, stated that “one of [my] main objections to torture is what it does to guys who actually inflict the torture”.¹⁴⁸ He noted an instance in which a tortured subject provided him information that the subject had not told the interrogators. When Pribbenow asked him why he had not given this information to the questioners, the subject responded, “They [the torturers] got so involved that they didn’t even bother to ask questions.”¹⁴⁹

Another more prosaic dynamic propelled the torture-abuse process forward: competition. Interrogation, like most any other work, has a competitive edge to it in which each strives to procure the juiciest piece of information, perform the gutsiest maneuvers – or, employ the most brutal methods. This occupational dynamic was described by a French interrogator from the Franco-Algerian War, “Our problem is as follows: are you able to make this fellow talk? It’s a question of personal success. You see, you’re competing with the others. In the end, your fists are ruined.”¹⁵⁰ Since interrogation is viewed by many of its practitioners as simply war by other means, it is generally infused with all the archetypal masculine imagery and machismo that typifies military culture. In light of this dynamic, Mackey’s grueling stints in the interrogation booths become understandable, as well as the decision of American personnel to term their work “monsterring,” a neologism laden with ghoulish connotations of power and mastery.¹⁵¹

Perhaps the most pernicious aspect of this occupational dynamic, however, was the manner in which it committed the interrogator to extracting and defending information at all costs – even

¹⁴⁷ Rejali, *Torture*, 502; Marnia Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 133, 268.

¹⁴⁸ Rejali, *Torture*, 502.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 456.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.; Mackey and Miller, *The Interrogators*, 422.

and, especially, if it was wrong. Once a particular set of answers was obtained it was difficult for interrogators to break from this narrative, as this could not only undercut the soldier's personal credibility amongst his or her peers, but potentially clash with the official reasons for the military's presence in Iraq. Furthermore, this proclivity to accept bad information was amplified by the fact that people are generally more willing to accept information out-of-hand than distinguish lies from the truth, a finding that has proved especially true for interrogators.¹⁵² Thus, Dave Grossman's description of the psychological investment that soldier's who have killed place in the act of killing rings equally true for interrogators who engaged in torture: "the killer must violently suppress any dissonant thought that he has done anything wrong. Further, he must violently attack anyone or anything that would threaten his beliefs. His mental health is totally invested in believing that what he has done is good and right."¹⁵³

Within the Abyss

For those who reached these depths, it was a very real possibility that torture was devolving from an instrument for procuring information to purely an exhibition of power. Many interrogators were haunted by their ineptitude; tortured by an ever-present feeling of inadequacy and bafflement.¹⁵⁴ Nothing seemed to work the way it was supposed to: not their training, their mission, or the sanctimonious promises of far-off officials.¹⁵⁵ The very assumptions that the war had been built on appeared to be in the process of being assiduously torn to shreds. When in the interrogation booth they felt as if the prisoner was mocking them, eminently aware of their naïveté and incompetence; knowingly spiting them as he or she malevolently and jealously guarded his or her secrets. Thus the only way to salvage their dignity and assure the prisoner but,

¹⁵² McCoy, *A Question*, 194; Rejali, *Torture*, 463-466.

¹⁵³ Grossman, *On Killing*, 212.

¹⁵⁴ Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight*, 124; Lagouranis, *Fear*, 95.

¹⁵⁵ See Sharrock, *Tortured*, 32; or Wood, *What Was Asked of Us*, 97.

more importantly, themselves of their control, was to break the prisoner.¹⁵⁶ It became a psychological imperative. For what else could reassure them more of their control over their own lives and mission than to break the very symbol of their ignorance, uncertainty, and frustration: the anonymous and uncooperative prisoner. In other words, torture became the ultimate release from the unreality of their existence – their salvation.

Unfortunately, it was generally not until erring soldiers returned home that they became fully cognizant of the extent to which they had descended into abuse and license – the abyss. Don Dzagulones, a veteran interrogator who operated in the Vietnam War and who now helps Iraq veterans adjust to civilian life, explained that “This is shit that you live with for a year and it becomes routine – it’s part of your life. You come back to the world, and it’s criminal. So where does that put you?”¹⁵⁷ While immersed in the toxicity of their netherworld, abuse was justifiable, its righteousness self-evident. Rationalizing their excesses put soldiers in a dangerous position that often led to increasingly lurid rationalizations, and a normative shift in outlook towards abusive behavior. For these interrogators and American personnel, it was an all too real possibility that abusive behavior would become an end unto itself: an inextinguishable lust for power or perverse coping mechanism that would eventually devour the abusers themselves.

As previously noted, this devolutionary process was aided immeasurably by the very nature of the work, as interrogators strive to achieve “complete power” over their subjects, denying them all “possible existential platforms” for resistance.¹⁵⁸ This exceptional power differential could cause “a dangerous expansion of the ego, leading to expanding cruelty and lasting emotional disorders” for the interrogator-turned-torturer.¹⁵⁹ Sociologist Marnia Lazreg’s study of

¹⁵⁶ Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight*, 124.

¹⁵⁷ Phillips, *None of Us*, 181.

¹⁵⁸ McCoy quoting psychotherapist Otto Doerr-Zegers, *A Question*, 10.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

torture draws similar conclusions, averring that “the core of torture: [is] absolute domination of the victim whose body and mind become a surface on which to imprint the torturer’s fancy.”¹⁶⁰ Thus, while torture is often initiated because of bigotry, fear, the desire for retribution, or steely rationalizations, it can also be initiated – and, in particular, normalized – by an addiction to this exercise of raw power. Mackey and Lagouranis’ accounts, in particular, reveal that interrogators in Iraq commonly viewed questioning sessions as a battle of wills, the goal being to “break” the subject; to so completely master them that the subject would become totally malleable and cooperative within their vice-like grip.

When carried to its extreme, this quest for domination became increasingly brutal, often sexualized. The sexualizing process was aided by the profession’s preexisting masculine overtones, which, as explained earlier, were assiduously cultivated by its practitioners. Lazreg writes that “The presence of women in men’s imaginary mediates their relation to one another at the exclusion of ethnicity or race,” prompting the interrogator to assert his masculinity or dominance by forcing the prisoners to strip or engage in degrading acts.¹⁶¹ To put it in other terms, the torture chamber becomes a stage upon which the interrogator is able to project his or her lust for power and fantasized sexual prowess upon a totally pliant victim. In Iraq this was aided by the fact that the stripping of prisoners was a “conscious strategy of sexual humiliation” meant to exploit Arabs’ supposedly abnormal aversion to being naked in public.¹⁶² It is only natural that practices that were intended to sexually humiliate prisoners would progress to more personalized forms of sexual domination and abuse, adding a new contour to Dave Grossman’s observation that “the procreative act and the destructive act are inextricably interlinked”.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight*, 268.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁶² McCoy, *A Question*, 130.

¹⁶³ Grossman, *On Killing*, 134.

While these particularly lurid forms of abuse were carried out by interrogation teams or military units collectively, they created a powerful pact between the perpetrators from which there was no return. This blood soaked investment bound them closer together, Grossman explaining that “Rape is a very important part of the process of dominating and dehumanizing an enemy; and this process of mutual empowerment and bonding at the expense of others is exactly what occurs during gang rapes.”¹⁶⁴ Specialist Lynndie England, who became the face of the Abu Ghraib scandal, has revealingly noted that “In war, you don’t rat on your buddies. There were only seven of us charged, but believe me, there were more behind the pictures.”¹⁶⁵ Simply stated, these perverse manifestations of raw power bound soldiers together. Even when they found themselves repulsed with their peers they knew that they were forever bound together by their shared crime. Each drew the other further and further down into ever darker depths.

Of course, this sexual manifestation of power most notoriously surfaced during the Abu Ghraib prison scandal of 2004. Yet, it would be a mistake to view sexualized displays of power as anomalies in Iraq since such manifestations of power were widespread and, consequently, are better understood as natural mutations of unfettered power. Lagouranis’ account details an incident in which Special Forces “stood around [a] prisoner, who was cold, wet, and shivering, with a thermometer in his ass,” while they gloatingly “puffed on cigars”.¹⁶⁶ For these soldiers, their ability to penetrate another being’s most intimate parts and exercise total control over that being’s destiny was a titillating, engrossing experience, and may even have become an addiction. Lagouranis personally admitted to becoming drunk with power and desensitized to his subjects at times, having written that he once contemplated mutilating a prisoner *because he could*: “It was cold and I was completely alone, except for this prisoner inside, who not only wouldn’t talk but

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 213.

¹⁶⁵ Brockes, ““What happens in war,”” *The Guardian*.

¹⁶⁶ Lagouranis, *Fear*, 80.

wouldn't acknowledge the absolute power I held over him... When I looked at him, the anger surged, amplified by the flashing lights and the booming noise. A thought flashed through my head: *Chop his fucking fingers off.*¹⁶⁷

Interrogators were not the only ones prone to becoming debauched with power. It was not unheard of for American combatants of all shapes to indulge in or become inured to abuse, especially if they were under the influence of environmental factors previously elucidated. For many soldiers, impossible conditions fostered a collective psychosis of sorts that permitted them to engage in exceptional behavior that seemed perfectly reasonable *under* their circumstances. Tragically, the magnitude of their perversity was only more fully realized only once *outside* of these circumstances. Jason Neely explained that when looking at the "big picture" it was easy to empathize with the plight of locals, but while under the strain of inordinate pressure "we'd talk about fucking shit up, and we'd be thinking to ourselves, *You know we're pretty fucked up. We think we're normal but we're fucked up.*"¹⁶⁸ Travis Williams echoed these sentiments, noting that his unit considered it perfectly normal to forcibly evict Iraqis from their homes so that his unit could use their facilities.¹⁶⁹ He explained this phenomenon simply by stating "That's what war does. War turns you into what your mother wishes you would never be."¹⁷⁰ Though the genesis of the mistreatment of Iraqis was often rooted in justifications involving self-preservation or utilitarian arguments concerning vague notions of security, these transgressions were, for some, in themselves cathartic, a form of psychological release. One soldier, Jason Smithers, confided that because of "a lot of tension" his unit would photograph dead bodies and contemplated filming a "*Marines Gone Wild*" type film as a defense mechanism for dealing with the unreality

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 127.

¹⁶⁸ Wood, *What Was Asked of Us*, 47.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 271.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 274.

of the chaos around them.¹⁷¹ His account provides a glimpse of the scarred and distorted mindsets of soldiers who struggled to continue living in a scarred and distorted world: “I guess maybe it would be weird to somebody who doesn’t see it all the time, but to us this was normal. It was something to laugh about. This dude looks cooler dead than that dude – he’s bloodier, he’s got a bigger hole. That’s the kind of stuff we looked at. It’s just like pictures of flowers. Some people think it’s queer, but if you’re around death all the time, you’re going to like the picture of it.”¹⁷²

Conclusion

The narrative of American excesses in Iraq is indispensable for understanding the war itself, as well as several unresolved tensions within American society. First, the accounts of soldiers themselves show that abuse was not solely the result of a few “bad apples” or the policies of an equally cloistered set of policymakers at the top echelons of government. To spend time debating the culpability of either group is unproductive and, in truth, shortsighted, profoundly distorting the torture-abuse narrative. Those who pursue this line of argumentation on either side, whether wittingly or otherwise, marginalize the extent to which excesses occurred, and redirect discussion away from the context in which American transgressions actually took place. As witnesses and partakers in abuse suggest, policies contrived at the executive level did play an important part in facilitating abuse. However, many soldiers who engaged in abuse were not cognizant of these policies and most of those who were did not understand them; a clean connection between policy and practice cannot be assumed. Thus, the power of these Talmudic policies and statements lay in their ambiguity, which perplexed the majority of soldiers, leading many to improvise procedure. Furthermore, the confused quality of regulations governing

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 159.

¹⁷² Ibid.

conduct between forces facilitated the spill-over of brutal techniques sanctioned for some forces but not others. As noted in relation to the role of the CIA and Joint Personnel Recovery Agency (JPRA), this allowed coercive methods to metastasize between forces, a phenomenon aided by a shared belief in the efficacy of torture and unfounded deference to members of the intelligence community. What ultimately resulted was the blind leading the blind and unintended consequences of a most pernicious variety.

Obviously, this fatal ignorance materialized in more ways than one, perhaps most visibly in the inability of soldiers to understand the Iraqi people, culture, and environment in which they operated. What little introduction they were given to Iraqi society by the military and government was distorted by outmoded notions and self-serving (but shortsighted) political imperatives. Smothered in stifling heat, enveloped in the pungent smell of boiling sewage and death, and tortured by the ever-present fear of attack, it is not surprising that many soldiers came to loathe their apparently cursed lot. A formidable cultural-linguistic chasm only added to the surrealistic quality of their existence, vastly facilitating the dehumanization of the very people they had been sent to save. Eventually, many soldiers came to see Iraqis as cruel appendages of an unforgiving landscape – a step made all too easy in the absence of even a semblance of normal human exchange. Interrogators, infantryman, and Americans of all stripes came to take part in the abuse and degradation that followed. Each could claim a role within a torture matrix legitimized by the quest for that fabled piece of intelligence that would remedy their collective ignorance – that is, affirm their quixotic visions, prejudices, and agenda. In short, psychologically beleaguered American personnel were charged with the fundamentally misconceived task of coercively extracting information from Iraqis. Many gravitated towards torture methods that only resulted in the scarring of their victims and themselves. The result was

a collective madness that wracked torturer and victim alike, blurring their roles as each moved deeper into the abyss.

Lastly, these episodes of brutality point to several unresolved tensions within American society. While the United States assiduously cultivates its image as a mantle bearer for human rights and democracy, the majority of its members in practice support the atavistic axioms ‘that might makes right’ and ‘the ends justify the means’. Americans have for decades condemned the use of ‘physical’ torture while vacillating on the use of so-called ‘psychological’ techniques that are the centerpiece of the Global War on Terror (GWAT). There is no difference in severity between the techniques, one is just as ineffective as the other, and in practice it is virtually impossible to separate the two – one inevitably leads to the other. Even so, the majority of Americans continue to be beguiled by the mystique of torture. As Alfred W. McCoy explains, torture is “erotically enticing, we are simultaneously fearful and fascinated” by it.¹⁷³ The willingness of Americans to support so-called psychological techniques and, in fact, support the Iraq War itself, is a startling admission that many are perfectly comfortable denying the rights of people abroad in order to pursue the misdirected goal of more security at home – that is, our own security.

Ultimately, these modes of thought are an irrational byproduct of fear and ignorance: the very same fear and ignorance that presaged and characterized American abuse of Iraqis. Marnia Lazreg writes that “The practice of systematic torture thrives on an amnesiac attitude regarding the inequities of a socioeconomic and political system that causes groups to ‘rebel’ in the first place. This amnesia gives torture its arbitrary character just as it adds another layer of powerlessness to the tortured.”¹⁷⁴ It is precisely this “amnesiac” character, or what one may call

¹⁷³ McCoy, *A Question*, 14.

¹⁷⁴ Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight*, 225.

a crippling ignorance of the history, grievances and, in fact, humanity of those sacrificed on America's altar of liberty, that allowed Americans to endorse the war in the first place. Thus, the torture narrative may be seen as the Iraq War in miniature, each inextricably linked and illuminating the motives and madness of the other. It is for this reason that the American public responded to Abu Ghraib scandal with indignation and disgust. What we saw made us profoundly uncomfortable. For while looking upon those photographs what we encountered was not an unknowable evil but, in fact, one with which we were intimately familiar; one with whom as a society we had willingly taken part. And as history shows, those who attempt to wield the uncontrollable specter of torture eventually begin to consume themselves, their paranoia and hubris paving the way for their own destruction.

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