

Beheading, Hooding, and Water Boarding:
CIA Torture in Vietnam, Latin America, and Iraq

by Nick Gier

"The weak will do anything to stop the pain. The strong will resist until the end."
-- a Roman jurist on torture

"The gloves are coming off . . . Col. Boltz has made it clear that we want these
individuals broken."
-- Abu Ghraib military intelligence e-mail, August 17, 2003

In 1966 the CIA launched the Phoenix Project, a program designed to destroy the South Vietnamese Communists, better known as the Viet Cong. Specially designed torture chambers were constructed in all 44 provinces and rape of women suspects, electric shock, water torture, and hanging from ceilings were standard methods during interrogations. Of the tens of thousands of South Vietnamese detained, at least 20,000 were summarily executed. Copying a Viet Cong practice, the severed heads of those executed were frequently displayed in the villages. Even more common was collecting the ears of dead Communist troops.

The principal incentive the CIA used for arresting suspects was money, and it was said that paid informants "often lied and set-up innocent people." Many detainees at Guantanamo were turned in by Afghan bounty hunters who were paid off by coalition officers. In night raids on Iraqi homes all males were routinely detained, but only 10-15 percent, admits intelligence officer Jose Garcia, are of any intelligence value.

In his book *A Question of Torture*, Alfred McCoy demonstrates that the CIA developed "no touch torture, based on sensory deprivation and self-inflicted pain." These techniques were "field-tested . . . in Vietnam . . . and then imported to Latin American and Asia under the guise of police training."

John Negroponte, former ambassador to Iraq and now U. S. intelligence czar, is a key person linking torture in Central America with Vietnam and Iraq. In his Senate confirmation hearings to become ambassador to Honduras (1981-85), Negroponte, speaking as a former political officer in Saigon, said that the U. S. could not afford to lose Central America to the Communists as it did in Vietnam.

In 1975 CIA director of George Bush, Sr. had already set up the Latin American equivalent of the Phoenix Project. Called "Plan Condor" the CIA enlisted the services of Cuban exiles and the deadly Chilean DINA to orchestrate the torture and assassination

of leftist leaders. Under this program Latin American military rulers tortured and "disappeared" thousands of their opponents.

Negroponte oversaw a huge military buildup in Honduras and was a principal player in arming the Contras and directing their terrorist activities against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Although he constantly denied it, he surely must have known about Battalion 3-16, one of many units responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of Hondurans. Battalion 3-16 was trained by the CIA, staffed by Argentine interrogators, and led by Gen. Discua Elvir, who was a graduate of the infamous School of the Americas (SOA), an army school that still trains Latin American security forces at Fort Benning, Georgia.

According to a UN Truth Commission report, two thirds of Salvadoran officers charged with human rights abuses were trained at SOA, and 40 percent of Guatemalan cabinet members were SOA graduates. Over 35 years an estimated 570,000 people died in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras as a result of nationalist insurgencies and U.S.-supported responses to them. In South America many countries are now embracing the leftist parties that the U. S. attempted to extirpate. For example, Chile is now ruled by the party of Salvador Allende whom the CIA helped overthrow in 1973.

In his article "Abu Ghraib: The Rule, Not the Exception," Dr. Miles Schuman, who has personally examined torture victims from Latin America, states that "the black hood covering the faces of naked prisoners . . . was known as la capuchi in Guatemalan and Salvadoran torture chambers." Contrary to initial impressions, the soldiers at Abu Ghraib evidently did not make up these techniques on their own. Filming the torture sessions was also not new.

Schuman describes some gruesome details: "The metal bed frame to which the naked and hooded detainee was bound in a crucifix position . . . was la cama, named for a former Chilean prisoner [to whom] electrodes were attached to her arms, legs and genitalia, just as they were attached to the Iraqi detainee poised on a box, threatened with electrocution if he fell off."

Schuman also mentions the case of Sister Diana Ortiz, "who was tortured and gang-raped repeatedly under supervision by an American in 1989, according to her testimony before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus." Jeanne Kirkpatrick, American UN ambassador under President Reagan, claimed that the many Catholic sisters who were tortured and killed in Central America were not really nuns, and Alexander Hague, Reagan's Secretary of State, branded them as armed leftist sympathizers who got what they deserved.

In 1982 Sister Laetitia Bordes questioned Negroponte at the U. S. Honduran Embassy about 32 women who had fled El Salvador after the assassination of Archbishop Romero. They had sought refuge in Honduras, and Sister Bordes wanted to know why they had disappeared. Even though he had intimate contacts the Honduran government

and military, Negro Ponte said that he knew nothing about them and could do nothing about it.

Jack Binns, Negro Ponte's predecessor who was removed from his post because he focused too much on human rights abuses, finally revealed the fate of the missing women. In a 1996 interview with The Baltimore Sun, Binns reported that on April 22, 1981, the women were tortured by Honduran secret police and then thrown to their deaths from helicopters. Binns further confirmed that U. S. authorities knew all about this.

From 1984-86 Colonel James Steel was head military advisor to the Salvadoran military, and then he reappeared as chief security advisor under Paul Bremer in Iraq. Some commentators have linked him with the torture chamber that was recently discovered in the bowels of the Baghdad Interior Ministry. In 2003 Lane McCotter, former director of the Utah state prison system, was hired to head the Abu Ghraib prison. During his tenure in Utah, Michael Valent died after 16 hours in a restraint chair and another prisoner was bound to a four point restraint board for 12 weeks.

U. S. authorities have admitted to using "water boarding" on at least 11 detainees. Called el submarino in Latin America, it involves strapping people to a board and submerging their heads in water. Those subjected to this treatment usually start talking after ten seconds, but Al Qaeda suspect Khalid Sheikh Mohammed lasted two and half minutes before he confessed. His U. S. torturers were impressed.

In Vietnam and Latin America we sometimes arranged for others do the dirty work for us, and this policy has continued in the War on Terror. Through a process called "rendition" the CIA transfers terror suspects to its own secret prisons, or to their home countries where they have been tortured. It is estimated that over 100 suspects have been transferred and over 1,000 CIA flights have been tracked over Europe and the Middle East. The Red Cross has requested that it be allowed to inspect all CIA prisons but it has been rebuffed repeatedly.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had to apologize to the German government for the rendition of its citizen Khaled el-Masri from Macedonia to Afghanistan, where he was subjected to five months of inhuman treatment. The U.S. also had to admit that it had captured the wrong el-Masri. On September 26, 2002, Canadian citizen Maha Arar was arrested in New York City and sent to Jordan where he was tortured.

On February 17, 2003, CIA agents kidnapped Egyptian cleric Hussan Mustafa Nasr on a street in Milan, Italy, and flew him to Egypt where he was tortured and then was disappeared. Italian authorities have issued arrest warrants for the CIA ruffians, but the U.S. has refused to extradite them. Ironically, the U. S. State Department blacklists Jordan and Egypt as countries that routinely torture their prisoners. Furthermore, the U. S. is a signatory to the UN Convention Against Torture that prohibits the return of prisoners to countries that are known to practice torture.

On August 17, 2003 an e-mail from the head of military intelligence at Abu Ghraib declared that the "gloves were off" and that the detainees were to be "broken." Two weeks later Major General Geoffrey Miller flew from Guantanamo to Iraq on orders to improve intelligence on an insurgency that is now stronger than ever. Even though Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld had approved of harsher techniques, and even though 26 intelligence officers were implicated, only eight low ranking soldiers have been court martialed for the crimes at Abu Ghraib. Gen. Miller was especially keen on capitalizing on the Arabs' fear of dogs, but the only one punished was the soldier who actually unleashed the dogs at Abu Ghraib.

President Bush became personally involved in the case of Al Qaeda suspect Abu Zubaydah, who was known to have mental problems. In his book *The One Percent Solution*, Ron Suskind reports that Bush asked CIA chief George Tenet if torture really worked. Zubaydah was water boarded and he began talking about all sorts of plots, but not a single one was verified in a huge waste of resources. The Roman jurist was correct: under torture the weak will say anything, but experience has also shown that very little valuable information is gained from anyone who is tortured.

President Washington refused to allow his soldiers to use the cruel methods that the British and Hessians had used against them. Continuing to preserve the moral high ground, President Roosevelt did not permit American officers to torture any Japanese even though they had tortured thousands of allied soldiers to death. The Axis Powers were a far greater threat to world peace than a few thousand terrorists, but still America preserved its values.

Senator John McCain, even though treated inhumanely by his North Vietnamese captors, insists that we "are different from our enemies . . . [and] if the roles were reversed, [we] would not disgrace ourselves by committing . . . such mistreatment of them." Even while detailing torture techniques, a CIA manual admits that "the routine use of torture lowers the moral caliber of the organization that uses it and corrupts those that rely on it."

By becoming like our enemies, we either alienate the people we want to liberate or drive them right into our enemy's hands. Rarely ever do evil means justify a good end, especially when the goal is a society of free persons whose value and dignity must always be preserved. It goes without saying that torture destroys the integrity of a human person.

The principal sources used for this column were Andrew Sullivan, "The Abolition of Torture: Saving the U. S. from a Totalitarian Future," *The New Republic* (December 19, 2005); "A Shameful Silence," *Army Times* (January 30, 2006); most of the articles in *The Nation* (December 26, 2005); "Torture in Iraq," *New York Review of Books* (November 3, 2005); and Mark Danner, "The Logic of Torture" and "Abu Ghraib: The Hidden Story," *New York Review of Books* (June 24, 2004 and October 7, 2004).