

[last updated: October 3, 2006]

**“A Short History of Psychological Torture:  
Its Discovery, Propagation, Perfection, and Legalization”**

**Alfred W. McCoy, University of Wisconsin-Madison**

**University of California at Davis, Center for Mind and Brain  
September 30, 2006**

**I. INTRODUCTION:**

1.) On April 28, 2004, Americans were stunned when CBS broadcast those now-notorious photographs from Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, showing hooded Iraqis stripped naked while U.S. soldiers stood by smiling.

2.) As this scandal grabbed headlines around the globe, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld insisted that the abuses were "perpetrated by a small number of U.S. military," whom *New York Times'* columnist William Safire soon branded "creeps."

3.) These photos are not, however, snapshots of simple brutality or a breakdown in military discipline.

a.) If we read these photos carefully, we can see the genealogy of CIA psychology torture techniques, from their origins in the 1950s to the present-day perfection.

b.) For example, that iconic photo of a hooded Iraqi with fake electrical wires hanging from his extended arms shows, not the sadism of a few "creeps," but instead the two key trademarks of the CIA's psychological torture:

1.) The hood is for sensory disorientation.

2.) The arms are extended for self-inflicted pain.

3.) As we will see, these two techniques are the foundational principles in a distinctively American doctrine of psychological torture--one developed and propagated by the CIA since the early 1950s and more recently, on September 29, legalized by US Congressional legislation.

4.) At the deepest level, the abuse at Abu Ghraib, Bagram, Guantanamo, and CIA “black sites” across the globe is manifestation of a long history of a distinctive U.S. covert-warfare doctrine developed during the Cold War and recently revived for the War on Terror, making torture a central if clandestine facet of American foreign policy for the past half-century.

5.) Sadly, the Abu Ghraib scandal, conditions at Guantanamo, and their severe blow to America’s international standing make it important, even imperative, for us to discuss torture—particularly that most persistent, most problematic, and most distinctively American form of torture, psychological torture.

## II. CIA TORTURE RESEARCH:

1.) Viewed historically, the Abu Ghraib scandal is the product of a deeply contradictory U.S. policy toward torture since the start of the Cold War.

a.) Publicly at the UN and other international forums, Washington opposed torture and advocated a universal standard for human rights.

b.) Simultaneously and secretly, however, the CIA propagated ingenious new torture techniques in contravention of these same international conventions.

2.) **CIA Research:** From 1950 to 1962, the CIA led a secret research effort to crack the code of human consciousness, a veritable Manhattan project of the mind with costs that reached a billion dollars a year.

a.) If we trace a narrative thread through a maze of hundreds of experiments, the CIA research moved through two distinct phases--first, an in-house exploration of exotic techniques such as hypnosis and hallucinogenic drugs, and, a later focus on behavioral experimentation by contract researchers, several the most brilliant behavioral scientists of their generation.

b.) While this Agency drug testing led nowhere, CIA-funded behavioral experiments, outsourced to the country’s leading universities--Harvard, Princeton, Yale, etc.--produced three key findings that contributed to the discovery of a new form of torture that was psychological, not physical, the first real revolution in the cruel science of pain in centuries.

d.) **Discovery #1--Sensory Deprivation:** In the early 1950s, famed Canadian psychologist Dr. Donald Hebb found that he could induce a state akin to psychosis in just 48 hours.

1.) What had the doctor done—drugs, hypnosis, electroshock?  
None of the above.

2.) For two days, student volunteers at McGill University, where Dr. Hebb was chair of Psychology, simply sat in a comfortable cubicle deprived of sensory stimulation by goggles, gloves, and ear muffs.

3.) One of Hebb's subjects, the UC-Berkeley English professor Peter Dale Scott, has described these methods in his 1992 epic poem, "Listening to the Candle":

nothing in those weeks added up  
 yet the very aimlessness  
 preconditioning my mind...  
 of sensory deprivation  
 as a paid volunteer  
 in the McGill experiment  
 for the US Air Force  
 (two CIA reps at the meeting)  
 my ears sore from their earphones'  
 amniotic hum my eyes  
 under two bulging halves of ping pong balls  
 arms covered to the tips with cardboard tubes  
 those familiar hallucination  
 I was the first to report  
 as for example the string  
 of cut-out paper men  
 emerging from a manhole  
 in the side of a snow-white hill  
 distinctly two-dimensional  
 For two days they paid my mind  
 To withdraw itself  
 From every impulse but its own  
 To look only on itself  
 Not seeing objects as objects  
 The humor of the darkness  
 Emboldening me to search  
 Deeper into silence.

4.) Dr. Hebb found that after just two to three days of such isolation "the subject's very identity had begun to disintegrate."

e.) **Discovery #2—Self-Inflicted Pain:** During the 1950s as well, two eminent neurologists at Cornell Medical Center working for the CIA found that the KGB's most devastating torture technique involved, not crude physical beatings, but simply forcing the victim to stand for days at time—while the legs swelled, the skin erupted in suppurating lesions, the kidney shut down, hallucinations began.

f.) **Discovery #3—Anyone Can Torture:** As the CIA prepared to disseminate its new paradigm among allies world-wide, the Agency needed to know who could be trained to torture.

1.) At Yale University, the young psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted his famed obedience experiments, asking ordinary New Haven citizens to torture on command and discovering that, in contravention of conventional wisdom, anyone could be trained to torture.

g.) **Kubark:** In 1963 after a decade of this mind-control research, the CIA codified its findings in a succinct, secret instructional handbook -- the "KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation" manual, which would become the basis for a new method of torture disseminated worldwide over the next three decades.

3.) If genius is the discovery of the obvious, then the CIA's discovery of this psychological or "no-touch torture" was a counterintuitive breakthrough, the first real revolution in the cruel science of pain in centuries.

a.) Through more than 2,000 years of Western judicial torture, the same problem persisted--the strong defied pain while the weak blurted out whatever was necessary to stop it.

b.) By contrast, the CIA's psychological paradigm fused two new methods, "sensory disorientation" and "self-inflicted pain," whose combination, in theory, would cause victims to feel responsible for their own suffering and thus capitulate more readily to their torturers.

c.) Through relentless probing into the essential nature of the human organism to identify its physiological and psychological vulnerabilities, the CIA's "sensory deprivation" became a total assault on all senses and sensibilities--auditory, visual, tactile, temporal, temperature, and survival.

d.) Refined through years of practice, sensory disorientation relies on a mix of sensory overload and sensory deprivation via banal procedures--

isolation then intense interrogation, heat and cold, light and dark, noise and silence--for a systematic attack on all human stimuli.

e.) The fusion of these two techniques, sensory disorientation and self-inflicted pain, creates a synergy of physical and psychological trauma whose sum is a hammer-blow to the existential platforms of personal identity.

4.) **CIA Paradigm:** In its clandestine journey across continents and decades, this distinctly American form of psychological torture would prove elusive, resilient, adaptable and devastatingly destructive—attributes that have allowed it to persist up to the present and into the future. Let's review each attribute:

a.) **Elusive:** Unlike its physical variant, psychological torture lacks clear signs of abuse and easily eludes detection, greatly complicating any investigation, prosecution, or attempt at prohibition.

b.) **Resilient:** Psychological torture is shrouded in a scientific patina that appeals to policy makers and avoids the obvious physical brutality unpalatable to the modern public.

c.) **Adaptable:** In 40 years since its discovery, the Agency's psychological paradigm has proved surprisingly adaptable, with each sustained application producing innovations.

1.) Indeed, under the war on terror we are witnessing the perfection of the CIA's psychological paradigm, through ad hoc research conducted at Guantanamo in 2002-2003, as a total, three-phase assault on sensory receptors, cultural identity, and individual psyche.

d.) **Destructive:** Although seemingly less brutal than physical methods, the CIA's "no touch" torture actually leaves searing psychological scars.

a.) Victims often need long treatment to recover from a trauma many experts consider more crippling than physical pain.

### III. Training Torturers During the Cold War:

1.) After codification in the 1963 KUBARK manual, the CIA spent the next 30 years propagating torture techniques within the US intelligence community and among anti-communist allies across Asia and Latin America.

2.) Although the Agency trained military interrogators from across Latin America, our knowledge of the actual torture techniques comes from a single handbook for a Honduran training session, the CIA's "Human Resources Exploitation Manual — 1983."

a.) In training Honduran military interrogators, this anonymous CIA trainer specified techniques that seem strikingly similar to those outlined 20 years *earlier* in the Kubark Manual and those that would be used 20 years *later* at Abu Ghraib.

#### IV. After the Cold War

1.) When the Cold War came to a close, Washington resumed its advocacy of human rights, ratifying the UN Convention Against Torture in 1994 that banned the infliction of "severe" psychological and physical pain.

2.) On the surface, the United States had apparently resolved the tension between its anti-torture principles and its torture practices.

3.) Yet when President Clinton sent this UN Convention to Congress for ratification in 1994, he included language drafted by the Reagan administration—with four detailed diplomatic "reservations" focused on just one word in the convention's 26-printed pages.

a.) That word was "mental."

b.) Significantly, these intricately-constructed diplomatic reservations re-defined torture, as interpreted by the United States, to exclude sensory deprivation and self-inflicted pain—the very techniques the CIA had refined at such great cost.

c.) This definition was reproduced verbatim in domestic legislation enacted to give legal force to the UN Convention--first in Section 2340 of the US Federal Code and then in the War Crimes Act of 1996.

**--N.B. Remember that obscure number--Section 2340--for it is the key to unlocking the meaning of the controversial Military Commissions Law enacted by the US Congress in late September.**

d.) In effect, Washington split the UN Convention down the middle, banning physical torture but exempting from psychological abuse.

4.) By failing to repudiate the CIA's use of torture, while adopting a UN convention that condemned its practice, the United States left this contradiction buried like a political land mine ready to detonate with such phenomenal force, just 10 years later, in the Abu Ghraib scandal.

## V. CIA Gulag & Abu Ghraib:

1.) Right after his public address to a shaken nation on September 11, 2001, President Bush gave his White House staff wide secret orders, saying, "I don't care what the international lawyers say, we are going to kick some ass."

2.) In the months that followed, Administration attorneys translated their president's otherwise unlawful orders into U.S. policy into three controversial, neo-conservative legal doctrines--(1.) the president is above the law, (2.) torture is legally acceptable, and (3.) the US Navy base at Guantanamo is not US territory.

a.) To focus on the single doctrine most germane to our focus on psychological torture, Assistant Attorney General Jay Bybee found grounds, in his now notorious August 2002 memo, for exculpating any CIA interrogators who tortured, but later claimed his intention was information instead of pain.

1.) Moreover, by parsing the UN and US definitions of torture as "severe" physical or mental pain, Bybee concluded that pain equivalent to "organ failure" was legal—effectively allowing torture right up to the point of death.

3.) **Gulag:** Less visibly, the administration began building a global gulag for torture at Abu Ghraib, Bagram, Guantanamo, and a half-dozen additional sites worldwide.

a.) **White House:** In early 2002, the White House, knowing the FBI's aversion to torture, stripped the Bureau of its long-established Counter-Intelligence role and transferred control over Al-Qaeda suspects to the CIA with wide latitude for coercive interrogation.

b.) **CIA:** In February 2002, the White House assured the CIA that the administration's public pledge to abide by spirit of the Geneva Conventions did not apply to its operatives; and allowed the agency ten "enhanced" interrogation methods designed by "agency psychologists" including "water boarding."

1.) This technique, which simulates drowning, was called “Torturae Gallicae Ordinariae” or “Standard Gallic Torture” in a 1541 French judicial handbook, would now become what CIA director Porter Goss called, in March 2005, a “professional interrogation technique.”

2.) After French paratroopers used this technique on him during the Battle for Algiers in 1957, the journalist Henri Alleg wrote a moving description that turned the French people against both torture and the Algerian War:

--[READ, *QUESTION OF TORTURE*, p. 19]:

“I tried,” Alleg wrote, “by contracting my throat, to take in as little water as possible and to resist suffocation by keeping air in my lungs for as long as I could. But I couldn’t hold on for more than a few moments. I had the impression of drowning, and a terrible agony, that of death itself, took possession of me.”

c.) Let us think about the deeper meaning of Alleg’s sparse words--“ a terrible agony, that of death itself.”

1.) As the water blocks air to the lungs, the human organism’s powerful drowning reflex kicks in and the brain is wracked by horrifically painful panic signals--death, death, death.

2.) Then the victim vomits out the water, the lungs suck air, and panic subsides.

3.) And then it happens again, and again, and again--each time inscribing the searing trauma of near death in human memory.

4.) **Guantanamo:** In late 2002, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld appointed Gen. Geoffrey Miller to command Guantanamo with wide latitude for interrogation, making this prison an ad hoc behavioral laboratory:

a.) Moving beyond the original attack on sensory receptors universal to all humans, Guantanamo’s interrogators stiffened the psychological assault by exploring Arab “cultural sensitivity” to sexuality, gender identity, and fear of dogs.

b.) Gen. Miller also formed Behavioral Science Consultation teams of military psychologists who probed each detainee for individual phobias, such as fear of dark or attachment to mother.

c.) Through this total three-phase attack on sensory receptors, cultural identity, and individual psyche, Guantanamo perfected the CIA's psychological paradigm.

d.) Significantly, after regular inspections of Guantanamo from 2002 to 2004, the Red Cross reported: "The construction of such a system...cannot be considered other than an intentional system of cruel, unusual and degrading treatment and a form of torture."

5.) **Abu Ghraib:** These enhanced interrogation policies, originally used only against top Al Qaeda operatives, soon proliferated to involve thousands of ordinary Iraqis when Baghdad suffered a wave of terror bombings in mid 2003 that launched the resistance to the US occupation.

a.) After a visit from the Guantanamo chief General Miller in September 2003, the U.S. commander for Iraq, General Ricardo Sanchez, issued orders for sophisticated psychological torture.

b.) As I read from those orders, please listen for the combined sensory disorientation, self-inflicted pain, and attacking Arab cultural sensitivities.

U. Environmental Manipulation: Altering the environment to create moderate discomfort (e.g. adjusting temperatures or introducing an unpleasant smell)...

V. Sleep Adjustment: Adjusting the sleeping times of the detainee (e.g. reversing the sleeping cycles from night to day).

X. Isolation: Isolating the detainee from other detainees..30 days.

Y. Presence of Military Working Dogs: Exploits Arab fear of dogs while maintaining security during interrogations...

AA. Yelling, Loud Music, and Light Control: Used to create fear, disorient detainee and prolong capture shock. Volume controlled to prevent injury....

CC. Stress Positions: Use of physical posturing (sitting, standing, kneeling, prone, etc.)

c.) Indeed, a review of the hundreds of still-classified Abu Ghraib photos reveals, not random, idiosyncratic acts from separate, sadistic minds, but

just 3 psychological torture techniques repeated over and over ad nauseum:

--hooding for sensory deprivation;

--short shackling, long shackling, and enforced standing for self inflicted pain; and total nudity, sexual humiliation,

--and dogs for that recent innovation exploitation of Arab “cultural sensitivity.”

c.) It is no accident that Private Lynndie England was photographed leading an Iraqi detainees leashed like a dog.

## VI. After Abu Ghraib:

1.) Let’s look at the aftermath of the Abu Ghraib scandal, seeing how America moved by degrees to impunity for perpetrators and to legalization of CIA psychological torture techniques.

2.) **Bush Policy:** Confronted by public anger over detainee abuse at Abu Ghraib, the Bush White House has fought back by defending torture as a presidential prerogative.

a.) By contrast, an ad hoc civil society coalition of courts, press, and human rights groups has mobilized to stop the abuse.

3.) **McCain Bill:** In mid 2005, Senator John McCain amended the must-pass Defense Appropriation Bill with an absolute ban on “cruel, inhumane and degrading” treatment of detainees, whether by the military or CIA.

a.) The White House sent Vice President Cheney into the Capitol to fight the bill with such fierce determination that the “Washington Post” branded him the “Vice President for Torture.”

b.) Then, just before last Christmas, all these tensions seemed to dissolve in a dramatic Oval Office handshake between Senator McCain and President Bush who announced that the landmark legislation made it “clear to the world that this government does not torture.”

c.) That media mirage concealed continuing White House moves to undercut this same legislation, using it to legitimate the same three

controversial, neoconservative legal doctrines that White House lawyers had devised to justify torture after 9/11.

d.) To focus on the doctrine most germane to this analysis, McCain had compromised his own legislation by inserting a legal defense for accused CIA interrogators that mimes the exculpatory logic of the administration's notorious August 2002 torture memo, now allowing US officials "engaging in specific operational practices that involve...interrogation" to claim, if charged, that they "did not know that the practices were unlawful."

4.) **Psychological Torture:** If we look behind the headlines for a deeper analysis, it seems that our country's history of psychological torture has complicated Congress's recent efforts to prohibit the practice.

a.) Indeed, right after Congress approved McCain's torture ban last December, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales parsed the word "severe" to insist the new law adds only "clarification" to Congress's existing definition of torture as "intentional infliction of severe physical or mental pain."

b.) The attorney general seemed to be echoing the opinions of his subordinates in the Justice Department who were already arguing that the McCain amendment would still allow "water boarding" --the same method that the French Inquisition had once called "standard Gallic torture" ("torturae Gallicae ordinariae").

## VII. MILITARY COMMISSIONS DEBATE:

1.) In a dramatic denouement of June 2006, the US Supreme Court decided in *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld* that Bush's military commissions were illegal because they did not meet the requirement, under common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, that Guantanamo detainees be tried with "all the judicial guarantees...recognized as indispensable by civilized peoples."

2.) Then on September 6, in a dramatic bid to legalize his now-illegal policies in the aftermath of the Hamdan decision, President Bush announced he was transferring fourteen top Al Qaeda captives from secret CIA prisons to Guantanamo Bay.

a.) At once both repudiating and legitimating past abuses, Bush denied that he had authorized "torture" while simultaneously defending the CIA's use of a tough "alternative set of procedures" to extract "vital information."

b.) By this bold public-relations stroke, Bush sought to trump critics, legitimating both his endless executive incarceration and tacit use of CIA torture.

c.) Coincidentally, that same day, the Pentagon released its new Army Field Manual specifically banning administration-authorized CIA interrogation techniques now deemed torture--including, nudity, hooding, and, the agency's favored method, "water boarding."

d.) The explicit references of course confirmed, indirectly, exactly which illegal methods had been and would be used by the CIA with the president's approval.

3.) Bush's bill aroused strong opposition by three Republican veterans on the Senate Armed Services Committee--Senators Graham, McCain, and Warner.

4.) After tense, day-long negotiations inside Vice President Cheney's Senate office on September 21, Republican partisans reached a compromise that simultaneously allows Senator McCain to claim that "the Geneva Conventions have been preserved" and the president legal leeway to contravene those conventions.

a.) Revisions to anti-torture legislation enacted in the mid 1990s would retain the ban on "grave breaches" of Geneva such as physical torture; but the president alone will establish, through a published executive order, the specifics of permissible interrogation.

b.) By making these standards retrospective to 1997, the agreement protects CIA operatives from prosecution for past offenses.

c.) Most significantly, by using verbatim the narrow definition of "severe mental pain" the U.S. first adopted back in 1994, allows CIA interrogators ample latitude for future psychological torture.

c.) And by using the same narrow definition of "severe mental pain" the U.S. first adopted back in 1994, allows CIA interrogators ample latitude for future psychological torture.

d.) This definition is concealed under Para. 950 V, Part B, Sub-Section B on page 70 of a 96-page law that reads:

1.) “Severe Mental Pain or Suffering Defined: In this section, this term ‘severe mental pain...’ has the meaning given that term in Sect. 2340 (2) of Title 18 [of the Federal code].”

2.) And what is that definition in section 2340?

3.) This is, of course, the same highly limiting definition the US first adopted back in 1994-95 when it ratified the UN Anti-Torture Convention.

e.) Simply put, this legislation’s highly restricted standard for severe mental suffering does not prohibit any aspect of the sophisticated torture techniques that the CIA has refined, over the past half-century, into a total psychological assault.

f.) To make this point clear, let us compare the law’s very narrow, four-part standard for “severe mental suffering” with the CIA’s psychological techniques to see which, if any, of the agency’s actual methods are banned.

1.) Under this law, Section 2340, there are only four practices that constitute, in any way, “severe mental pain,” including:

- a.) One, drug injection,
- b.) Two, death threats,
- c.) Three, threats against another,
- d.) and, Four, extreme physical pain.

2.) In actual practice, this definition does not ban any of the many CIA psychological methods developed over five decades, which include:

- a.) First, self-inflicted pain, via enforced standing and so-called “stress positions” which are cruel contortions enforced by shackling.
- b.) Second, sensory disorientation through temporal and environmental manipulation exemplified sleep deprivation, protracted isolation, and extremes of heat and cold, light and dark, noise and silence, isolation and intensive interrogation.

c.) Third, attacks on cultural identity through sexual humiliation and use of dogs.

d.) Fourth, attacks on individual psyche by exploiting fears and phobias.

e.) Fifth, hybrid methods such as water-boarding.

f.) And, Sixth and most importantly, creative combinations of all these methods which otherwise might seem, individually, banal if not benign.

g.) By its omissions, this legislation has effectively legalized the CIA's right to use methods that the international community, embodied in the Red Cross and the UN Human Rights Committee, considers psychological torture.

4.) Projecting these trends forward, political pressures are forcing the Bush administration to back away, by degrees, from its defiant use of inhumane treatment.

a.) But instead of a full prohibition of torture, Washington may well retreat to the covert CIA practices, concealed by subtle psychological methods and rendition to brutal allies, that marked US policy in the half-century before 9/11.

b.) Looking through a glass darkly into the future, we may thus return to that convenient Cold War contradiction: public compliance with human rights treaties and secret torture in contravention of those same diplomatic conventions.

## VIII. CONCLUSION:

1.) In retrospect, the pervasive influence of the CIA's torture paradigm can be seen in the recurrence of the same techniques used by both American and allied security agencies in both the Cold War and the War on Terror.

2.) Across the span of three continents and four decades, there is a striking similarity in U.S. torture techniques, both their conceptual design and specific techniques--from the CIA's 1963 Kubark interrogation manual, to the Agency's 1983 Honduras training handbook, all the way to General Ricardo Sanchez's 2003 orders for interrogation in Iraq.

3.) With the release of those Abu Ghraib photos and revelations about Guantanamo, Americans are now faced with a choice that will influence the character of their nation and its reputation in the eyes of the world.

a.) We can honor our commitments under law and treaty to ban torture unconditionally.

b.) Or, we can agree with the Bush administration's decision to make torture a permanent weapon in the arsenal of American power.

4.) As a powerfully symbolic state practice synonymous with brutal autocrats, torture—even of the few, even of just one—raises profound moral issues about the quality of America's justice, the character of its civilization, and the legitimacy of its global leadership.

5.) "Cruelty disfigures our national character," warns Alberto Mora, the US Navy's general counsel who fought to stop the Pentagon's psychological torture at Guantánamo. "Where cruelty exists, law does not."