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Review/Reseña

Alfred W. McCoy *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation From the Cold War to the War on Terror*. NY: Metropolitan Books, 2006

The Tortured History of State Terror

Lesley Gill
American University

When U.S. citizens responded to the revelations of prison torture in Abu Ghraib with incredulity, their disbelief was not shared by many people around the world, especially in Latin America where the torture scandal stirred painful memories of the dirty wars that scarred the last half of the 20th century. Hooding prisoners and submitting them to electrical shock was a common practice carried out by U.S.-trained security forces, and

the torture technique known as "waterboarding," in which a detainee is submerged in water until he believes that he will die, was widely used on prisoners, who called it the "submarino." Unfortunately, in the United States the memory of Latin American atrocities, the conflicts in which they took place, and the involvement of the U.S. military remain hazy among a largely indifferent public, and nowadays a number of public figures assert that torture by U.S. security forces only began after the 9/11 attacks, when the CIA supposedly took of its gloves in a new, more deadly war of terror.

A Question of Torture penetrates the historical amnesia and offers a corrective to the government record of denials and misrepresentations about the participation of the U.S. military in torture. The book demonstrates that U.S. security forces used torture long before Abu Ghraib, and that it formed an integral part of how U.S. power was projected abroad. McCoy traces the development of CIA torture techniques in the 1950s and examines their application in places such as Vietnam, Latin America, Iraq and Afghanistan, and he makes a persuasive case that torture does not work because most of the information coerced from prisoners is worthless.

McCoy shows how, during the early phases of the Cold War, the CIA funded the research of leading psychologists to develop new forms of mind control, and enlisted the collaboration of prominent universities, hospitals, and the U.S. Agency for International Development. After experiments with hallucinogenic drugs, such as LSD, failed to provide useful results, the agency financed studies of sensory deprivation, which, through a series of trails and errors reported in scholarly journals, lead to the refinement of "no-touch torture." The research demonstrated how a few simple techniques—isolation,

sleep deprivation, hooding, maintenance of stressful positions for long periods, the manipulation of time, temperature fluctuations, bad of food, and subjection to noise—could constitute a total assault on a victim's mental equilibrium and induce psychosis within a relatively short period of time. The agency synthesized the findings of its academic collaborators into the notorious 1963 *Kubark Counterintelligence Interrogation* handbook, which informed the CIA's training programs throughout the world for the next forty years.

The global dissemination of the new psychological interrogation doctrine proceeded through two phases and moved quickly away from the strictly psychological techniques to embrace brutal physical tactics as well. First, the CIA operated through police-training programs in Latin America and Asia, where the standardization of torture tactics began to appear in the abusive practices of police agencies in South Vietnam, Uruguay, Iran and the Philippines. As the Vietnam War heated up, however, the CIA concentrated its efforts on South Vietnam, where the Phoenix program represented the culmination of U.S.-sponsored physical and psychological brutality. According to one military intelligence veteran, not a single Vietcong suspect survived interrogation during the year that he worked with the program, and by 1972, Operation Phoenix had claimed the lives of over twenty thousand people. Yet aside from the deaths and brutalization, the program produced few concrete results.

The CIA eventually shifted its torture training to the Army's Military Adviser Program, which trained counterinsurgency forces around the world, especially Central America. Through an initiative known as "Project X", it also shipped thousands of counterinsurgency training manuals to friendly militaries in numerous countries, and U.S. instructors

used versions of these manuals at the U.S. Army's "School of the Americas", a military training center for Latin American security forces, where perpetrators of some of the worst human rights crimes in cold war Latin America received instruction.

McCoy notes that even though congressional investigations and major newspapers, such as the *Baltimore Sun*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*, eventually exposed the sordid details of the CIA's torture training in Honduras, Iran, and elsewhere, the public response remained muted, and Americans in general preferred to leave the seamy side of American foreign policy unexamined and to forget the massive human rights violations that had taken the lives of thousands of people. In the absence of a powerful domestic human rights movement, the CIA survived the cold war, even as other cold war intelligence agencies in Eastern Europe collapsed, and Americans pushed its crimes into the forgotten past. Yet as McCoy shows, because the U.S. intelligence apparatus was not substantially reformed and its personnel held accountable, the CIA remained capable of the same abusive practices that had long characterized the organization. Not surprisingly, in the aftermath of 9/11, the torture techniques that had been honed through decades of experience in Vietnam, Latin America, and elsewhere reappeared in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantánamo Bay.

Yet even as revelations of the torture of detainees appeared in major news media, the September 11th terrorist attacks had shifted the moral compass of the U.S. public. The legitimacy of torture was widely discussed on prime-time network television programs, where debates about its usefulness were once unimaginable. Prominent academics, such as Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz, proposed that in certain cases—the "ticking bomb" scenario—torture should be an acceptable form of

interrogation, and leading figures in the Bush administration redefined torture to exclude practices that it previously included, such as sleep deprivation and psychological disorientation.

McCoy argues that torture does not work as an interrogation technique because detainees will say anything to stop the pain, and the intelligence value of any information is therefore of dubious quality. Torture also brings with it high political costs. It discredits that United States, a nation that purports to bring democracy and human rights to the rest of the world, and it is less likely to protect U.S. national security than make us all more vulnerable to future terrorist attacks by fueling outrage about U.S. behavior in the Middle East. By demonstrating that there is nothing new about torture in the U.S. military, *A Question of Torture* raises questions about the widespread impunity within the United States that has allowed the CIA to remain unreformed and that has permitted high-ranking perpetrators of human rights crimes to remain unaccountable. The lack of justice and accountability within the U.S. intelligence community imperil democracy at home and abroad, and this book is must reading for anyone concerned with these issues.