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## **RETHINKING THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TORTURE**

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### **RETHINKING THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TORTURE:**

#### **A Preliminary Report from Former Interrogators and Research Psychologists**

Torture does not yield reliable information and is actually counterproductive in intelligence interrogations, which aim to produce the maximum amount of accurate information in the minimum amount of time. In fact, popular assumptions that torture works conflict with the most effective methodologies of interrogation, as well as with fundamental tenets of psychology.

That was the conclusion of a research seminar in November composed of retired senior military interrogators and research psychologists from diverse fields. The group met at Georgetown University and formed a study group to consider the psychology of torture.

The interrogators, all of whom are also peripherally involved in training interrogators, have conducted interrogation and other human intelligence operations in Vietnam, Grenada, Desert Storm, Bosnia, Kosovo, and the ongoing war in Iraq. They reviewed for the psychologists the U.S. military training program for interrogators and the established interrogation methodologies, which exclude torture.

The psychologists were able to understand the effectiveness of the diverse, established interrogation methods in terms of psychological theories and research. The group then moved to an analysis of the ineffectiveness of torture as an interrogation tool. The interrogators maintained that, even in the most urgent situations, torture cannot be considered a viable option. The involuntary circumstances of the disclosure would compromise the integrity of the information obtained. Decades of research into directly relevant topics such as social influence, stress, cultural and religious identification, false confessions, and interpersonal relationships point to the same conclusion, according to the psychologists.

Naïve assumptions that torture “works” fail to recognize that, under torture, the innocent are apt to fabricate and those with real information and training

to resist interrogation are apt to alter the information or present carefully rehearsed lies instead.

A common argument for torture is the “ticking time bomb” scenario, in which a terrorist who knows the location of a bomb is tortured in a race to save lives. Interrogators stated that the terrorist would know that he only has to keep his secret for the short time until the bomb detonates—a time period known to him but not to the interrogators. Moreover, the torture would offer the terrorist a prime opportunity to deceive interrogators by falsely naming bomb locations of difficult access. In their combined 100 years of interrogation experience, the interrogators had never encountered a true ticking bomb scenario.

According to the interrogators, harsh approaches are typically the first choice of novice and untrained interrogators but the last choice of experienced professional interrogators. The detainee’s fear, the interrogators said, can easily turn to anger, which may escalate to the point that the interrogator cannot re-establish emotional control of the situation. The interrogator then loses all possibility of cooperation from the detainee. But cooperation is crucial to the goal of trustworthy information. Severe stress and injury, interrogators added, may also impair the mental ability of the detainee to provide accurate information.

One psychologist speculated on reasons for the centuries-old “folk belief” in the effectiveness of torture interrogation. For example, schoolyard bullies, abusive parents, and muggers attempt to make their targets comply physically through threat and force. In contrast, the interrogator seeks willing mental compliance.

Another psychologist noted that confidence in torture interrogation follows from the outdated behaviorist conception of human behavior, which dominated psychology in the first half of the 20th century. The idea was that the behavior of humans, much like the behavior of rats, is controlled primarily by external rewards and punishments. Today, psychologists in brain science, cognitive psychology, and social psychology have come to appreciate the inherent complexity of human thought, emotion, and action. It has been shown that people not only operate independently of rewards and punishments but often in direct opposition to them.

The study group was sponsored by Psychologists for Social Responsibility and the Georgetown University Department of Psychology, and its work was made possible through a generous grant from the David and Carol Myers Foundation. The joint group of psychologists and interrogators plans to continue its examination of the relative effectiveness of coercive and non-coercive interrogation methodologies. Its findings will be shared with the public, policymakers, and international professional associations in the field of psychology. Attached is a list of the participating psychologists.

## **Participating Psychologists**

**Jean Maria Arrigo** is an independent scholar who studies ethics of political and military intelligence. She established the *Ethics of Intelligence and Weapons Development Oral History Collection* at UC Berkeley and the *Intelligence Ethics Collection* at Stanford University. She is co-founder of the International Intelligence Ethics Association.

**Ronnie Janoff-Bulman** is a professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Her past work focused on trauma and victimization. Her current research explores the psychology of morality, in an attempt to better understand people's moral judgments and intuitions, and their implications for prejudice and politics.

**Clark McCauley** is a social psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania whose research has included group dynamics, stereotyping and other issues of inter-group perception, polygraphy, and more recently, ethno-political conflict, terrorism and response to terrorism, and genocide.

**Fathali M. Moghaddam** is a professor of psychology at Georgetown University. Most of his work revolves around issues of justice and inter-group conflict, including radicalization and terrorism.

**Allison Redlich** is a developmental psychologist, whose research concerns psychology and the law. She examines the competency and capabilities of persons involved in the criminal justice system, especially as it pertains to police interrogations.

**Robin Vallacher** is an experimental social psychologist at Florida Atlantic University who has researched topics ranging from personality, self-concept, attitudes and values, and social judgment to issues of social justice, social change, and most recently, international conflict. He is a leading authority on dynamical social psychology, which involves the study of complex systems to identify the basic principles that are common to otherwise very different topics and levels of social reality.

**Richard Wagner** is professor emeritus of psychology at Bates College, president of Psychologists for Social Responsibility, and editor of *Peace and Conflict: The Journal of Peace Psychology*.