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Split Seen on Interrogation Techniques

Navy official says many back stance against coercion

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WASHINGTON -- A top Navy official whose warnings about "abusive" interrogation policies at Guantanamo Bay in December 2002 led the Navy to consider pulling its investigators out of the prison operation says his view that coercion does not produce quality information is shared by many specialists in the military and intelligence world.

In his first interview since his warnings were disclosed, Dr. Michael Gelles, the head psychologist for the Navy Criminal Investigative Service, said last week that many government intelligence professionals believe that coercive interrogation techniques -- inflicting pain or humiliation in order to extract information -- simply don't work.

And he expressed frustration that Bush administration policymakers have "dismissed" critics of coercive techniques as doves who are unwilling to do what is necessary to obtain information from terror suspects. In fact, Gelles said, many experienced interrogators are convinced coercive techniques do more harm than good.

The best way to extract intelligence from a captured Muslim extremist, Gelles said, is through "rapport-building" -- by engaging the suspect in conversations that play on his cultural sensitivities. Gelles said he and others have identified patterns of questioning that can elicit accurate information from Middle Easterners, but declined to disclose them for security reasons.

"We do not believe -- not just myself, but others who have to remain unnamed -- that coercive methods with this adversary are . . . effective," Gelles said. "If the goal is to get information, then using coercive techniques may be effective. But if the goal is to get reliable and accurate information, looking at this adversary, rapport-building is the best approach."

Gelles, the NCIS's top psychologist for 15 years, has participated in interrogations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantanamo. He noted that the NCIS's experience with Muslim extremists predates Sept. 11, 2001, including probes into the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen and the 1983 bombing of a Marine barracks in Lebanon.

The Navy granted Gelles permission to speak to the Globe after the recent disclosure of his role in prompting the first internal review of interrogation techniques at Guantanamo Bay. The Navy prohibited him from discussing specific experiences in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Cuba, or disclosing conversations with senior officials.

But he described a broad division between interrogation specialists like himself and Pentagon policy makers. Gelles said that his skepticism about coercive interrogations is quietly supported by many government specialists, including fellow psychologists, intelligence analysts, linguists, and interrogators who have experience extracting information from captured Islamist militants.

The strategy behind a coercive approach, he said, is to try "vacuum up all the information you can and figure out later" what is true and what is not. This method, he argued, clogs the system with false and misleading data. He compared it to "coercive tactics leading to false confessions" by suspects in police custody.

Gelles said rapport-building need not be soft just because it is not humiliating or physically painful: Telling a detainee that he is a contemptible murderer of children or that he may never be released from detention if he doesn't cooperate are perfectly acceptable tactics. "Being respectful doesn't mean you don't confront, clarify, and challenge the detainee when he gives the appearance of being deceptive," he said.

But, he warned, coercive techniques will induce a detainee to say anything to make the discomfort stop. At various points, US officials have approved of threatening prisoners with menacing dogs, shackling prisoners into painful "stress positions" for up to four hours, and engaging in physical contact that threatens the subject but does not injure him. Some interrogations have gone further. FBI reports say prisoners have been sexually humiliated and shackled for 24 hours without food.

"Why would you terrify them with a dog? So they'll tell you anything to get the dog out of the room?" Gelles asked. "I know there is a school of thought that believes [stress positions] are effective. In my experience, I've never see it be of any value."

Sometimes, he said, innocent suspects who have no information to provide will make up stories just to stop the abuse.

A Red Cross report last year estimated that between 70 percent and 90 percent of military detainees in Iraq had been arrested by mistake in the confusion of the insurgency. The head of interrogations at Guantanamo has said that the majority of the 540 detainees there have no useful information.

The military has also already released at least 211 former Guantanamo inmates -- among them several British men who said they falsely confessed under duress to being in a video with Osama bin Laden, but who were later cleared when the British government determined that they had been in England at the time the video was shot in Afghanistan.

Gelles's assertions were further bolstered last week by the release of newly uncensored portions of a memo written by an FBI agent who had been at Guantanamo in 2002. The previously withheld passages show that FBI agents considered the results obtained from certain military interrogations to be "suspect at best."

The previously censored passages were disclosed by the Bush administration at the request of Senator Carl Levin, Democrat of Michigan.

The memo also describes how FBI agents tried to persuade military commanders that coercive techniques were unreliable and recounts a "heated" video teleconference in which the FBI showed the military that certain intelligence produced by coercive techniques "was nothing more" than what the FBI got with traditional tactics: "[The Defense Department] finally admitted the information was the same the Bureau obtained. It still did not prevent them from continuing [their own] methods."

Gelles could not, under Navy rules, describe his own role in exposing possible abuses at Guantanamo Bay. But the most comprehensive military review of interrogations around the world cited him as sounding an early warning about "abusive techniques and coercive psychological procedures" in December 2002.

A month later, in response to the Navy's concerns, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld rescinded an order allowing some of the most coercive techniques.

But in the two years that followed, accounts of the physical abuse -- and, in some cases, the deaths -- of military detainees under interrogation around the world have emerged, leading to a series of official investigations and ongoing lawsuits.

