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Ugly Truths About Guantanamo

Richard Cohen
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Somewhere in the U.S. government is the person who came up with the idea of fusing the wail of an infant with an incessant meow from a cat food commercial to torment detainees at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Detainees were also subjected to popular songs by the likes of Eminem and Rage Against the Machine. What Liberace would have done to an observant Muslim, I can only imagine, but it is a mad genius who realized that ordinary American culture can, with repeated exposure, be nearly lethal. God help us all.

In George Orwell's novel "1984," it was rats, as I recall, that were used to torture Winston Smith. It was not that the rats could do real physical damage; rather it was that Smith was phobic about them -- "his greatest fear, his worst nightmare" -- and so he succumbed, denounced his beliefs and even his girlfriend, and went back to his pub where he wasted his days drinking gin. This was Orwell's future, our present.

The term "Orwellian" is much abused, and back in the actual year 1984 I thought Orwell himself overrated. The essential novelist of the 20th century, I thought then, was Kafka, who realized that there is no more efficient murder weapon than what the critic George Steiner called "the lunatic logic of the bureaucracy."

Orwell, however, was off by only 20 years. With immense satisfaction, he would have noted the constant abuse of language by the Bush administration -- calling suicidal terrorists "cowards," naming a constriction of civil liberties the Patriot Act and, of course, wringing all meaning from the word "torture." Until just recently when the interpretation of torture was amended, it applied only to the pain like that of "organ failure, impairment of body function, or even death." Anything less, such as, say, shackling detainees to a low chair for hours and hours so that one prisoner pulled out tufts of hair, is something else. We have no word for it, but it is -- or was until recently -- considered perfectly legal.

The administration's original interpretation of torture was promulgated by the Justice Department, under John Ashcroft, and the White House, under its counsel, Alberto R. Gonzales. The result has deeply embarrassed the United States. Among other things, it produced the abuses of Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, which we were assured were an unaccountable exception. My God, if only higher authorities had known.

Now we all know. The International Committee of the Red Cross has complained that some of what has been done at Guantanamo -- Guantanamo, not Abu Ghraib -- was "tantamount to torture." The American Civil Liberties Union has complained, but that you would expect. So, though, have the FBI and military lawyers, former and current. Just about across the board, the Bush administration has raised itself above the law. It pronounced itself virtuous, but facing a threat so dire, so unique, that Gonzales found the Geneva Conventions themselves "obsolete." Such legal brilliance does not long go unrewarded. He has been nominated to become attorney general.

The elevation of Gonzales is supposed to be a singular American success story. This son of Mexican immigrants bootstrapped his way to Harvard Law School and from there to Bush's inner circle, first in Austin, then in Washington. There he came up with a brilliant definition of torture, one so legally clever that only the dead could complain and they, of course, could not. Everyone was off the hook. Is it any wonder the Senate will probably soon confirm him? By next year, he

will undoubtedly receive a cherished Presidential Medal of Freedom, awarded to those who successfully serve the president but dismally fail the nation. In the audience, unseen but nonetheless present, Orwell and Kafka look on.

The revelations coming out of Guantanamo are hideous. The ordinary abuse of prisoners, the madness instilled by gruesome incarcerations, the incessant lying of the authorities, plus the mock interrogations staged for the media, in which detainees and their interrogators share milkshakes -- all this soils us as a nation. It's as if the government is ahistorical, unaware of how communists and fascists also strained language and ushered the world into torture chambers made pretty for the occasion. We now keep some pretty bad company.

The Bush administration has fused Orwell with Kafka in the same way someone fused the cry of an infant with that of a cat from the Meow Mix television commercial. The upshot is Gonzales, ticketed maybe for the Supreme Court because he winked at torture and yessed the president. He's Kafka's man, Orwell's boy and Bush's pussycat. Know him for his roar.

Meow.