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Torture's Long Shadow

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Washington Post

December 18, 2005

One nasty morning Comrade Stalin discovered that his favorite pipe was missing. Naturally, he called in his henchman, Lavrenti Beria, and instructed him to find the pipe. A few hours later, Stalin found it in his desk and called off the search. "But, Comrade Stalin," stammered Beria, "five suspects have already confessed to stealing it."

This joke, whispered among those who trusted each other when I was a kid in Moscow in the 1950s, is perhaps the best contribution I can make to the current argument in Washington about legislation banning torture and inhumane treatment of suspected terrorists captured abroad. Now that President Bush has made a public show of endorsing Sen. John McCain's amendment, it would seem that the debate is ending. But that the debate occurred at all, and that prominent figures are willing to entertain the idea, is perplexing and alarming to me. I have seen what happens to a society that becomes enamored of such methods in its quest for greater security; it takes more than words and political compromise to beat back the impulse.

This is a new debate for Americans, but there is no need for you to reinvent the wheel. Most nations can provide you with volumes on the subject. Indeed, with the exception of the Black Death, torture is the oldest scourge on our planet (hence there are so many conventions against it). Every Russian czar after Peter the Great solemnly abolished torture upon being enthroned, and every time his successor had to abolish it all over again. These czars were hardly bleeding-heart liberals, but long experience in the use of these "interrogation" practices in Russia had taught them that once condoned, torture will destroy their security apparatus. They understood that torture is the professional disease of any investigative machinery.

Apart from sheer frustration and other adrenaline-related emotions, investigators and detectives in hot pursuit have enormous temptation to use force to break the will of their prey because they believe that, metaphorically speaking, they have a "ticking bomb" case on their hands. But, much as a good hunter trains his hounds to bring the game to him rather than eating it, a good ruler has to restrain his henchmen from devouring the prey lest he be left empty-handed. Investigation is a subtle process, requiring patience and fine analytical ability, as well as a skill in cultivating one's sources. When torture is condoned, these rare talented people leave the service, having been outstripped by less gifted colleagues with their quick-fix methods, and the service itself degenerates into a playground for sadists. Thus, in its heyday, Joseph Stalin's notorious NKVD (the Soviet secret police) became nothing more than an army of butchers terrorizing the whole country but incapable of solving the simplest of crimes. And once the NKVD went into high gear, not even Stalin could stop it at will. He finally succeeded only by turning the fury of the NKVD against itself; he ordered his chief NKVD henchman, Nikolai Yezhov (Beria's predecessor), to be arrested together with his closest aides.

So, why would democratically elected leaders of the United States ever want to legalize what a succession of Russian monarchs strove to abolish? Why run the risk of unleashing a fury that even Stalin had problems controlling? Why would anyone try to "improve intelligence-gathering capability" by destroying what was left of it? Frustration? Ineptitude? Ignorance? Or, has their friendship with a certain former KGB lieutenant colonel, V. Putin, rubbed off on the American leaders? I have no answer to these questions, but I do know that if Vice President Cheney is right and that some "cruel, inhumane or degrading" (CID) treatment of captives is a necessary tool for winning the war on terrorism, then the war is lost already.

Even talking about the possibility of using CID treatment sends wrong signals and encourages base instincts in those who should be consistently delivered from temptation by their superiors. As someone who has been on the receiving end of the "treatment" under discussion, let me tell you that trying to make a distinction between torture and CID techniques is ridiculous. Long gone are the days when a torturer needed the nasty-looking tools displayed in the Tower of London. A simple prison bed is deadly if you remove the mattress and force a prisoner to sleep on the iron frame night after night after night. Or how about the "Chekist's handshake" so widely practiced under Stalin -- a firm squeeze of the victim's palm with a simple pencil inserted between his fingers? Very convenient, very simple. And how would you define leaving 2,000 inmates of a labor camp without dental service for months on end? Is it CID not to treat an excruciatingly painful toothache, or is it torture?

Now it appears that sleep deprivation is "only" CID and used on Guantanamo Bay captives. Well, congratulations, comrades! It was exactly this method that the NKVD used to produce those spectacular confessions in Stalin's "show trials" of the 1930s. The henchmen called it "conveyer," when a prisoner was interrogated nonstop for a week or 10 days without a wink of sleep. At the end, the victim would sign any confession without even understanding what he had signed.

I know from my own experience that interrogation is an intensely personal confrontation, a duel of wills. It is not about revealing some secrets or making confessions, it is about self-respect and human dignity. If I break, I will not be able to look into a mirror. But if I don't, my interrogator will suffer equally. Just try to control your emotions in the heat of that battle. This is precisely why torture occurs even when it is explicitly forbidden. Now, who is going to guarantee that even the most exact definition of CID is observed under such circumstances?

But if we cannot guarantee this, then how can you force your officers and your young people in the CIA to commit acts that will scar them forever? For scarred they will be, take my word for it.

In 1971, while in Lefortovo prison in Moscow (the central KGB interrogation jail), I went on a hunger strike demanding a defense lawyer of my choice (the KGB wanted its trusted lawyer to be assigned instead). The moment was most inconvenient for my captors because my case was due in court, and they had no time to spare. So, to break me down, they started force-feeding me in a very unusual manner -- through my nostrils. About a dozen guards led me from my cell to the medical unit. There they straitjacketed me, tied me to a bed, and sat on my legs so that I would not jerk. The others held my shoulders and my head while a doctor was pushing the feeding tube into my nostril.

The feeding pipe was thick, thicker than my nostril, and would not go in. Blood came gushing out of my nose and tears down my cheeks, but they kept pushing until the cartilages cracked. I guess I would have screamed if I could, but I could not with the pipe in my throat. I could breathe neither in nor out at first; I wheezed like a drowning man -- my lungs felt ready to burst. The doctor also seemed ready to burst into tears, but she kept shoving the pipe farther and farther down. Only when it reached my stomach could I resume breathing, carefully. Then she poured some slop through a funnel into the pipe that would choke me if it came back up. They held me down for another half-hour so that the liquid was absorbed by my stomach and could not be vomited back, and then began to pull the pipe out bit by bit. . . . Grrrr. There had just been time for everything to start healing during the night when they came back in the morning and did it all over again, for 10 days, when the guards could stand it no longer. As it happened, it was a Sunday and no bosses were around. They surrounded the doctor: "Hey, listen, let him drink it straight from the bowl, let him sip it. It'll be quicker for you, too, you silly old fool." The doctor was in tears: "Do you think I want to go to jail because of you lot? No, I can't do that. . . ." And so they stood over my body, cursing each other, with bloody bubbles coming out of my nose. On the 12th day, the authorities surrendered; they had run out of time. I had gotten my lawyer, but neither the doctor nor those guards could ever look me in the eye again.

Today, when the White House lawyers seem preoccupied with contriving a way to stem the flow of possible lawsuits from former detainees, I strongly recommend that they think about another flood of suits, from the men and women in your armed services or the CIA agents who have been or will be engaged in CID practices. Our rich experience in Russia has shown that many will become alcoholics or drug addicts, violent criminals or, at the very least, despotic and abusive fathers and mothers.

If America's leaders want to hunt terrorists while transforming dictatorships into democracies, they must recognize that torture, which includes CID, has historically been an instrument of oppression -- not an instrument of investigation or of intelligence gathering. No country needs to invent how to "legalize" torture; the problem is rather how to stop it from happening. If it isn't stopped, torture will destroy your nation's important strategy to develop democracy in the Middle East. And if you cynically outsource torture to contractors and foreign agents, how can you possibly be surprised if an 18-year-old in the Middle East casts a jaundiced eye toward your reform efforts there?

Finally, think what effect your attitude has on the rest of the world, particularly in the countries where torture is still common, such as Russia, and where its citizens are still trying to combat it. Mr. Putin will be the first to say: "You see, even your vaunted American democracy cannot defend itself without resorting to torture. . . ."

Off we go, back to the caves.

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