

If it feels like torture, it must be torture

By Mort Rosenblum
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Ask any reporter who knows brutal regimes: No hairs can be split over torture. Victims see no ambiguity. The memory stays fresh all their lives. More than pain, they recall smoldering contempt for their torturers.

You might have asked Baudouin Kayembe, the courageous owner of a weekly paper who helped me when I covered the Congo in the 1960s. But he died from his torture.

Over 40 years, Baudouin's intimates never forgave Mobutu Sese Seko, the man responsible, nor American authorities who kept Mobutu in power.

I saw this repeatedly in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. But nothing made the point like Argentina's guerra sucia, its dirty war on terror.

Government goons particularly favored el submarino. They held suspects' faces underwater until lungs nearly burst. Sometimes they waited too long.

As is usually the case with torture, it backfired. Little useful intelligence was gained. Survivors talked to anyone who would listen. Decent societies reacted. And it took Argentina decades to live it down.

Each time I interviewed victims, hearing their bitter words and watching their hands shake, I felt a flash of gratitude for the blue passport in my left pocket. We Americans reviled torture, as individuals and as a nation. When it was exposed, we reacted. Torture was one reason we invoked for overturning Saddam Hussein.

Today, we Americans have come up with "waterboarding," which sounds like a fraternity prank. It is el submarino: cruel and, for a people who respect themselves, unusual.

Obviously, we are a far cry from an Argentine military that put thousands to death in a long nightmare of official terror. But what are we prepared to accept?

Our justification is the same that was used in Argentina: What Vice President Dick Cheney calls harsh interrogation is needed to protect innocent people from terrorism. Our government contracts some of this harsh interrogation to private mercenaries who pledge no allegiances. Not even the Argentines did that.

President George W. Bush denies that we torture, which adds hypocrisy to our sins. His attorney general, Michael Mukasey, refuses to call waterboarding torture and won't rule out its use.

Whatever Americans may think, judgment elsewhere is plain. When our highest authorities excuse torture – even applaud it – it is no surprise that terrorist ranks swell and so many people loathe us.

Even if torture did provide useful information, what is the longer-term cost? By employing such terror ourselves, we lose claim to a higher moral plane.

Not long ago, I was on a Tufts University panel with a retired white South African police colonel and an African National Congress leader he used to torture. Both agreed: Brutal methods eroded the policeman's humanity while it fortified the activist's resolve. The torturers lost in the end.

The debate goes on and on. I just heard Justice Antonin Scalia of the U.S. Supreme Court on National Public Radio evoke the ticking-bomb conundrum. What if a suspect has knowledge that could save many lives? Extreme methods might help in specific cases.

That's fine for a law school hypothesis, others argued, but it does not work that way. Police don't know what a suspect can tell them – or whether he is lying to escape torture.

Authorities insist that exceptional measures are reserved for very specific instances. But once torture is permitted, it becomes generalized.

For anyone not clear whether something is torture, here is a simple test: Try it. Not under controlled circumstances, when you know that it will stop. Try it for real. Find some sadist accountable to no one. Stick with it long enough to see the irrelevance of sterile debate at a safe distance. Does water actually enter the lungs? Does it matter?

What defines torture is the inner damage it causes – the indelible mark on mental circuitry.

Terrorists are out there, and we have to thwart them. This takes intelligence in all of its meanings. We need police work and tough punishment when justified. But we also must understand human reality.

If we act blindly, brushing aside perceived injustices that underpin terrorism, we face growing ranks of enemies desperate to make us pay in some dramatic fashion. If we fight evil with inhumanity, what does that make us?

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