

# Torture: A coward's idea of toughness

By Gene Lyons

No sensible person wants to see the United States become the kind of country where "regime change" means flinging the party out of power into dungeons. That said, it's nothing short of pathetic to observe pundits who urged Bill Clinton's impeachment for lying about a private sexual matter rending their garments over the prospect of holding Bush administration insiders responsible for war crimes including kidnapping, torture and even murder.

Excuse me, make that "extraordinary rendition," "enhanced interrogation" and a series of regrettable accidents. Or something. Even the Bush administration seems not to have invented a bureaucratic euphemism for prisoners found beaten to death in solitary confinement. And how did President Bush, who claimed

a dictator's power to imprison thousands purely on his say-so, determine them to be "enemy combatants?"

Not by anything resembling evidence in many cases. Some were certainly guilty of plotting against the United States. Many have confessed, although confessions obtained by torture aren't worth the blood they're written in — one reason several hundred "detainees" remain in military prisons in Guantanamo and Afghanistan today. Others were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, or belonged to the wrong tribe. Some were grabbed by Afghan and Pakistani warlords eager to collect \$5,000 U.S. bounty payments.

Others, such as Canadian telecommunications engineer Mahar Arar, or German national Khaled el-Masri, were snatched because their names resembled somebody else's, stripped naked, drugged, beaten, transported to secret "black sites" and brutalized. Although guilty of nothing more than being of Middle Eastern descent, by the time U.S. authorities admitted his innocence and returned him to Canada, Arar had signed numerous false confessions of plotting with Al Qaeda in countries where subsequent investigation proved he'd never been.

Because that's the other thing about "enhanced interrogation" that never happens on television. Besides being brutal and immoral, torture doesn't work. Victims will say anything to stop the pain. According to Jane Mayer's remarkable book "The Dark Side," CIA psychologists spent years studying the methods of Stalin's KGB without pausing to think that the purpose of Soviet "show trials" wasn't to find the truth, but to expose imaginary conspiracies for the sake of ideological conformity and fear.

Another source of inspiration for Bush administration thugs, Mayer documents, was the Fox TV show "24," in which CIA hero Jack Bauer saved America by torturing villains week after week — a Hollywood melodrama concocted by a fellow with no intelligence experience whatsoever. They might just as profitably have studied Big Brother's techniques in Orwell's "1984."

Mayer's well-sourced accounts of White House delib-

erations about torture read like black comic "Dilbert" episodes. The dominant figure appears to have been one David Addington, a vice-presidential staffer known as "Cheney's Cheney."

A bearish figure of authoritarian views, Addington's principal means of persuasion *appears* to have been looming over timorous sycophants like Alberto Gonzales and John Yoo — author of the infamous 2002 legal memo justifying anything short of "organ failure, impairment of bodily function or even death" as legitimate interrogation techniques — and screaming

at them. Not that Gonzales and Yoo needed persuading. The latter's upside-down reading of the Constitution renders the president an absolute monarch, outside and above the law — precisely what the Founding Fathers set out to make impossible. Less easily intimidated persons exposed to the Adding-

ton method found themselves wondering, "How did this lunatic end up running the country?"

The short answer is: By grafting himself to Darth Cheney, who in turn attached himself to the eternally adolescent George W. Bush. Intellectually lazy and absurdly preoccupied with appearing tough, "The Decider" was easily manipulated by his Machiavellian vice president.

As for Cheney, last seen making the TV talk show rounds all but bragging about "waterboarding," Colin Powell's former chief of staff Col. Lawrence Wilkinson observes that, "Cheney was traumatized by 9/11. The poor guy became paranoid."

So did much of the country following the 2001 terrorist strikes on Washington and New York. It's time we pulled ourselves together. Torture's a coward's idea of toughness; it represents exactly the kind of tribal obscurantism represented by Al Qaeda. In that respect, the Bush administration's outrages against the law handed Osama bin Laden a huge propaganda victory.

Having brushed aside warnings of the terrorist threat, the Bush White House panicked in the wake of 9/11, magnifying a band of stateless religious zealots into an existential threat to the republic. Violating their oath to protect and defend the Constitution, they descended to a level of barbarism the United States rightly punished at the Nuremberg Trials after World War II. As the sadism spread to Abu Ghraib and beyond, the damage to American interests was profound.

Incoming President Obama can't simply pretend these things didn't happen. Whether the situation warrants a special prosecutor, or a commission of inquiry such as those convened in nations like Chile, Argentina and South Africa to deal with government-sanctioned barbarism, something must be done.

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