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How the CIA Outsourced Torture

Tim Molloy
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Among the many revelations in the Senate Intelligence Committee’s investigation into the use of torture by the CIA is this crucial detail: The CIA delegated much of its “enhanced interrogation” to others.

The report discloses that in 2008, 85 percent of the workforce in the CIA’s Rendition, Detention and Interrogation Group was made up of contractors. Former FBI special agent Ali Soufan, who was at the center of the Sept. 11 investigations, told FRONTLINE that he believes that the CIA’s most troubling interrogation practices can be traced to the agency’s decision to hand over key responsibilities to these outsiders.

“They hired people from outside,” said Soufan, who testified to Congress in 2009 about what he saw as the many flaws in the CIA’s procedures. “We hire the best and the brightest to work for the government, and then we outsourced to people who we have no clue who they are.”

According to the report, the CIA paid out \$81 million to a company led by two military psychologists whose previous experience was at the U.S. Air Force Survival, Evasion,

Resistance and Escape school. They are not named in the report, but they have been identified by *The New York Times* as Bruce Jessen and Jim Mitchell.

Neither had experience as an interrogator or with Al Qaeda, but they developed theories based on the concept of “learned helplessness,” according to the report. “Learned helplessness” is a psychological phenomenon in which people under duress effectively abandon hope. The original 1960s research on it involved shocking dogs into a state of passivity and surrender.

The CIA also paid out \$1 million to indemnify their company against legal claims. Their contract ended in 2009.

Mitchell told CBS News that the report is “not balanced” and called it an attempt to “smear” the CIA. He said he could not confirm he was one of the psychologists described in the report. Jessen has previously said that a confidentiality agreement prevents him from discussing his work with the agency, but in a 2007 statement he and Mitchell said, “The advice we have provided, and the actions we have taken have been legal and ethical. We resolutely oppose torture.”

Former CIA agents, meanwhile, say the report’s contention that the agency’s techniques were not successful is inaccurate.

CIA director John Brennan, who took over last year, said in a news conference Thursday that so-called “enhanced interrogation techniques” were used by the agency on “several dozen detainees over the course of five years before they ended in December of 2007.” He said the techniques had been deemed legal by the Bush administration’s Justice Department, but that President Obama “unequivocally” banned them when he took office.

Brennan also said it was “unknowable” whether information gleaned through enhanced interrogation techniques could have been gotten through routine interrogations.

Soufan, the subject of the FRONTLINE documentary *The Interrogator*, has said a good interrogator should try to develop rapport and trust with his or her subject.

The Senate report details how the CIA and its contractors often took a sharply different approach, using techniques like waterboarding, solitary confinement, sleep deprivation and physical violence to get people to talk.

The report concludes that it didn’t work.

Soufan said the case of Abu Zubaydah, an Al Qaeda logistics planner, underlines the flaws with the hardline “enhanced interrogation” approach.

In March 2002, Zubaydah was wounded and captured in a raid in Pakistan, making him the first high-profile terror suspect to come into U.S. custody after 9/11. During debriefings with Soufan from March through late May, Zubaydah gave up Khalid Sheikh Mohammad as the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks and spoke about an alleged dirty bomb plot to be carried out by Jose Padilla.

“This experience fit what I had found throughout my counterterrorism career: traditional interrogation techniques are successful in identifying operatives, uncovering plots and saving lives,” Soufan wrote in an op-ed for *The New York Times* in 2009.

Despite Soufan’s progress with Zubaydah, the CIA began using tougher tactics, eventually waterboarding him at least 83 times, according to the report. Soufan said the CIA used threats of imminent danger to justify harsh tactics. They also put Zubaydah in solitary confinement for 47 days, the report said.

“They always try to sell the idea that they started the program because of a ticking bomb. The report clearly shows this is not true,” Soufan said. “The only high-value detainee that the government has in their hands in 2002 — who just identified the mastermind of 9/11, who just gave us actionable information on an alleged dirty bomb plot — they put him in isolation for 47 days. No one talked to him for 47 days. ... That is scary.”

The U.S. needs to put a permanent stop to the failed torture tactics, Soufan says.

“I think we need to put some administrative policies in place that will prevent these tactics from ever being used again,” he said. “As long as there is no sense of accountability, I fear we will be on this disastrous path again.”