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Why the CIA tortured

Gareth Porter

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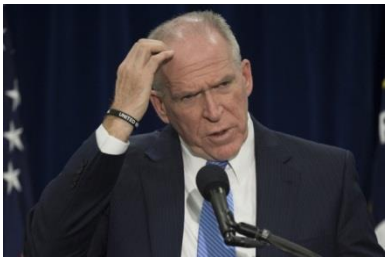

Bureaucratic momentum, the desire to be 'important', helped drive torture programme to point where officials involved had too much to lose to call a halt

The Senate Intelligence Committee's 500-page "executive summary" of the 6,700-page full report on the CIA's "enhanced interrogation" programme has completely shattered the official myth that the torture of al-Qaeda detainees - which the CIA calls "enhanced interrogation techniques" - somehow helped to thwart further terrorist attacks.

After examining six million pages of official CIA documents, the committee staff refuted every one of the CIA's claims that its torture programme generated the crucial intelligence that led to the disruption of plots and the apprehension of terrorist suspects.

The committee's case is documented in such mind-numbing detail, based on the CIA's own internal documents, that the CIA was compelled to acknowledge in its responses in June 2013 to each specific case analysed that it had repeatedly "mischaracterised" the relationship between its detention and interrogation programme and the disruption or failure of various proposed terrorist actions.

But the committee report leaves little doubt that the CIA was not simply mistaken about the issues involved; it had for years been systematically lying about virtually every aspect of the torture programme.

The report revealed that senior CIA officials decided in 2005 to destroy the videotapes of interrogations carried out under the programme when the idea of an independent investigation of the programme was first broached. The destruction was clearly carried out in order to ensure that the evidence could not be used to prosecute those responsible.

The report's complete demolition of the rationale for the torture programme raises an obvious question: if the CIA knew that it was not really getting information that would help prevent terrorist attacks, why did the programme continue until 2008? Why not cut the agency's losses years earlier?

The answer to that question lies not in the normal human reasoning but in the fundamental logic of all bureaucratic organisations. By their nature, bureaucracies seek to expand and defend their power, prominence and resources, and the CIA is no exception. The agency's detention and torture programme is a perfect example of how national security institutions pursue their organisational interests at the expense of even the most obvious interests of the nation they are supposed to serve.

What created the opportunity for the programme, as CIA director George Tenet recalled later, was the fact that Pakistani counter-terrorism officials rounded up more than two dozen al-Qaeda operatives simultaneously in March 2002. This quickly led to the capture of Abu Zubaydah, the highest ranking al-Qaeda operative at that time - although his actual status in the hierarchy was apparently not very high.

The prospect of extracting crucial intelligence from Zubaydah and other "high value detainees" prompted Tenet and his associates to begin developing the idea for a whole new programme that would go well beyond existing legal and ethical boundaries for interrogation. The powerful appeal of such a programme to the CIA's counter-terrorism officials lay in the huge enlargement of the CIA role in US national security policy. The currency by which senior CIA officials measure the agency's bureaucratic power is what they referred to as their "authorities" - their freedom to undertake various activities.

By taking on a new role in detention and interrogation of terrorist suspects, the CIA clearly stood to make unprecedented gains in this kind of power. Tenet hints in his memoirs that: "We were asking for and we would be given as many authorities as the CIA ever had." The most important such "authority", of course, was the legal assurance that what had previously been considered illegal and "torture" would now be redefined as something else.

What was arguably equally or even more important to senior CIA officials working on terrorism was the opportunity to occupy center stage in what appeared to be the most compelling drama of the post 9/11 era. CIA officials certainly imagined themselves as extracting "actionable

intelligence" from high-level detainees with their tough new approach to interrogation and being given credit for preventing the new attacks that they were certain were being hatched.

It was such dreams of basking in the glory of being responsible for saving the country from future terrorist attacks that gave the CIA torture project such bureaucratic momentum.

What animates national security bureaucracies to push for major new programmes is the desperate need to be important - to be a major "player" in big issue of the era. James Risen recounts in his new book, Pay Any Price, how the CIA's Directorate of Science swallowed a fraudulent claim by a shady contractor in 2003 that they had a digital technology that could decode al-Qaeda terrorism instructions embedded in Al-Jazeera broadcasts - all because the directorate was afraid it had lost its importance in the previous several years.

The same need prompted the CIA to sign a deal up two contract psychologists who pushed an equally fraudulent theory of interrogation they called "learned helplessness", which held that the way to get prisoners to spill all their secrets is to break their will.

Just as the Directorate of Science was taken in because of its dreams of a new status, the CIA bought into the false interrogation theory because it played into the heroic fantasy of breaking the will of the evil-doers and stopping the terrorists from striking again. It may not be accidental that the notion that torture would work on the bad guys surfaced in the wake of the enormously popular TV series "24" in which Jack Bauer showed millions of Americans how it could be done - albeit without the elaborate machinery of abuse that the CIA would create.

But the CIA's efforts to extract actionable intelligence by breaking the will of the detainees turned out to be an unrealistic fantasy, as the senate committee report documents. The detainees, who had often been cooperative prior to the application of torture tactics, simply told the torturers what they wanted to hear, as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had warned before refusing to be associated with the CIA tactics.

Senior CIA officials had pushed false information about how successful the programme had been from the very beginning, claiming credit for disruptions and captures that had nothing to do with the torture programme. Yet by 2005, it was evident to many in the CIA that the experiment had been a failure. CIA officials involved in the programme recognised that negative messages about the programme were beginning to seep out - so they had to become even more aggressive in lying about the programme.

The senate report quotes the deputy director of the CIA's Counter-terrorism Center in a message to a colleague in 2005 as saying: "We either get out and sell it or we get hammered." If Congress sees negative media coverage of the programme, he warned, "it cuts our authorities, messes up our budget….[T]here is no middle ground."

So the programme didn't end when it became clear that it didn't work the way it was supposed to for the simple reason that the officials involved had too much to lose.