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Why Did They Torture?

By Justin Raimondo

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The Senate Intelligence Committee's report on how the US government tortured detainees at Guantanamo and at secret "black sites" all over the world has focused on how they did it: rectal feeding, hanging detainees by their arms, "stress positions," beatings, etc. The prurience of this focus is fairly obvious, and typical of decadent societies in general – which is not to say that the details of "how" are irrelevant. They underscore the moral bankruptcy of the regime that permitted these practices. Yet this preoccupation with the sordid details tends to overlook the "why" of it – the key to understanding what the neocons in control of the national security apparatus during the Bush years were really after.

They say they were after al-Qaeda's alleged plans to carry out further strikes on the US homeland and American facilities abroad, but there is evidence in the report that their purpose was much more specific. Major Charles Burney, a psychiatrist who served at the Guantanamo Bay facility, told the committee that "a large part of the time we were focused on trying to establish a link between al-Qaeda and Iraq." That Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon posed a seemingly insoluble problem for the interrogators: however, the failure to produce results did not impress higher-ups in Washington. The torturers were told to get rougher: As Burney testified: "There was more and more pressure to resort to measures that might produce more immediate results."

The administration had already decided, early on, to attack Iraq: all that was needed was "proof" of Saddam Hussein's connection to the 9/11 attacks – and they didn't care how they got it. In a 2009 interview with the McClatchy news agency, a former highly-placed former US intelligence officer said:

"[F]or most of 2002 and into 2003, Cheney and Rumsfeld were also demanding proof of the links between al-Qaeda and Iraq. ... There was constant pressure on the intelligence agencies and the interrogators to do whatever it took to get that information out of the detainees, and when people kept coming up empty, they were told by Cheney's and Rumsfeld's people to push harder."

As Patrick Cockburn points out in the *Independent*, detainees were subjected to the worst torture "in the run-up to the war in 2003, suggesting that rather than preventing further action by al-Qaeda, the US administration was intent on justifying the invasion of Iraq. One prisoner, Abu Zubaydah, who was wrongly thought to be an al-Qaeda leader by his interrogators, was waterboarded 83 times in August 2002, and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed 183 times in March 2003. The first questions asked of the latter after he was captured in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, were all about Iraq and not about forthcoming al-Qaeda attacks, according to *The Eleventh Day: The Full Story of 9/11* by Anthony Summers and Robbyn Swan." The book also relates how Cheney's office wanted to waterboard a top Iraqi official to get him to "verify" the alleged Iraqi connection to al-Qaeda.

While all this was happening in the underground torture chambers, up above ground the neocons were torturing the truth with fabricated "evidence" of Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction." Remember the Niger uranium papers – crude forgeries – used by President George W. Bush in his 2003 State of the Union speech to back up the claim that Iraq was seeking to procure fissionable material to make a nuke? Then there was the tall tale about an Iraqi intelligence officer who had supposedly met 9/11 hijacker Mohammed Atta at an airport in Prague. Ahmed Chalabi and his fellow "heroes in error" provided a constant stream of ersatz "intelligence" that invariably wound up on the front page of the *New York Times*. All of it was utter nonsense, as we pointed out here at the time – and to this day we don't know how much of it originated in the desperate attempts by detainees to end the pain being inflicted on them by Cheney's dungeon-masters.

Yet there are strong hints of it in the Senate report, specifically in footnote 857, which tells us:

"Ibn Shaykh al-Libi reported while in [Egyptian] custody that Iraq was supporting al-Qa'ida and providing assistance with chemical and biological weapons. Some of this information was cited by Secretary Powell in his speech at the United Nations, and was used as a justification for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Ibn Shaykh al-Libi recanted the claim after he was rendered to CIA custody on February [redacted], 2003, claiming that he had been tortured by the [redacted], and only told them what he assessed they wanted to hear. For more details, see Volume III."

We'll never get to read Volume III – at least, not until the Revolution – thanks to Senate Intelligence Committee chair Diane Feinstein, who supported the war and is no doubt protecting her own ample behind by hiding from the public how easily Cheney and the neocons deceived

her. Her decision to keep secret the actual Senate report – as opposed to the released summary – is justified by invoking all the usual "national security" reasons, but perhaps political security has more to do with it.

This is the real secret that the released portions of the Senate torture report only hint at: the Cheney administration gulled Congress into supporting the Iraq war with "evidence" based on coerced confessions tortured out of detainees who told interrogators what they wanted to hear. Key members of Congress may not have known the details of "enhanced interrogation" techniques, but they surely didn't look too closely because they knew in general terms what was going on – and were thus complicit not only in these crimes but in their own deception.

We are told by the pollsters that Americans don't care about torture, and that only us rarefied types are raising moral objections to a practice for which the US government prosecuted Japanese war criminals. And the polls may be right, although it all depends on how the question is asked – but what if the question were posed as follows?:

"Do you approve or disapprove of US government officials using torture on detainees in order to justify a war based on a lie?"

Why did they torture? The Cheneyites claim they wanted information on a follow-up attack to 9/11 they were sure was coming, but the logic of this falls apart under the most cursory examination. After all, the recipient of torture is certain to say whatever he (or she) thinks the torturers want to hear – just to make the pain stop. Some within the CIA protested and no doubt brought up this very point – one the policymakers at the top knew full well. They knew torture was ineffective in getting at the truth – but it wasn't truth they were after. They who wove a web of lies to entangle us in the Iraqi spider's web – where we are caught to this day – were convinced they had created their own truth. As Ron Susskind recalled his conversation with a top Bush White House aide:

"The aide said that guys like me were 'in what we call the reality-based community,' which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.' ... 'That's not the way the world really works anymore,' he continued. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.'"

Torture was part and parcel of the reality-creation project the neocons carried out in the run up to the invasion of Iraq. It fueled the machinery of deception set up in the bowels of the Pentagon to bamboozle the nation and the world about the real nature of America's post-9/11 agenda.

"We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality" – out of the blood and anguished screams of the tortured.

A scheduling note: This will be my last column until Monday, December 29 – yes, even Antiwar.com columnists get a Christmas break! However, we are on call 24/7, so if anything Big

happens, I'll be at my post. And I may just contribute a few blog items along the way. At any rate, I'll be seeing you on the 29th – with my prognostications for the New Year. Until then, have a good Christmas.

NOTES IN THE MARGIN

You can check out my Twitter feed by going [here](#). But please note that my tweets are sometimes deliberately provocative, often made in jest, and largely consist of me thinking out loud.