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Cold War

Militarism, Torture ... and Air Conditioning?

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An instrument of torture

Among the many haunting images to come out of Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison were photos of Military Police Specialists Sabrina Harman and Charles Graner smiling and posing with a dead man packed in ice. Manadel al-Jamadi had been tortured to death by his CIA interrogators, who then kept his corpse chilled until it could be removed from the site (with an intravenous drip in his arm to fool other prisoners into believing he was alive.) But many other detainees were very much alive when they were administered the cold treatment.

The US Army Field Manual, last updated in 2006, forbids "inducing hypothermia" as a means of torture. But a secret 2007 report by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), leaked in 2009, scrutinized the treatment of "high value detainees" held by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in facilities at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and it shows that the CIA did not recognize the military's restrictions as valid. ICRC charged, "Detainees frequently reported that they were held for their initial months of detention in cells which were kept extremely cold, usually at the same time as being kept forcibly naked. The actual interrogation room was often reported to be kept cold." [8]

Overchilling was thought to enhance the effects of other "enhanced techniques" such as waterboarding. From 2002 through 2008, as first-hand accounts of detainees' treatment trickled out of Bagram airbase in Afghanistan, Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, Guantanamo, and other less well-publicized scenes of horror, the over-chilling of cells and interrogation rooms was repeatedly employed as a technique of "persuasion."

One of the more well-known prisoners, alleged Osama bin Laden associate Abu Zubaydah, testified that in 2002 he was held for an extended period in, of all places, Thailand. He was kept naked, with no blanket, in a bare room that was "air-conditioned and very cold." One US official said Zubaydah would appear to "turn blue." [8]

Second-generation Briton Moazzam Begg was captured in Pakistan in 2002, accused by the United States of being an enemy combatant, and taken to Bagram and then to Guantanamo. Begg—who was never charged with any crime and was eventually released—reports being kept in an outrageously air-conditioned cell with only a thin plastic sheet to fend off the cold. An FBI official reported visiting another Guantanamo detainee who was kept barefoot and shivering under intense air conditioning one day and in 100° temperatures with no ventilation the next. [8].

Mohammed al-Qahtani, was accused of having planned to serve as a twentieth 9/11 hijacker. He had been refused entry to the United States in August 2001 and was later captured in Afghanistan. This shocking account of treatment he received is based on a late 2002-early 2003 Army interrogation log from Guantanamo Bay:

“For eleven days, beginning November 23, al-Qahtani was interrogated for twenty hours each day by interrogators working in shifts. He was kept awake with music, yelling, loud, white noise, or brief opportunities to stand. He was then subjected to eighty hours of nearly continuous interrogation until what was intended to be a 24-hour “recuperation.” This recuperation was entirely occupied by a hospitalization for hypothermia that had resulted from deliberately abusive use of an air conditioner. Army investigators reported that al-Qahtani’s body temperature had cooled to 95 to 97 degrees Fahrenheit and that his heart rate had slowed to thirty-five beats per minute . . . The prisoner slept through most of the 42-hour hospitalization after which he was hooded, shackled, put on a litter and taken by ambulance to an interrogation room for twelve more days of interrogation, punctuated by a few brief naps. These and other instances of abusive chilling were within Army guidelines (“cooling with an air conditioner was authorized ‘environmental manipulation’”) and usually supervised by physicians.” [9]

A 2008 Senate Armed Services Committee report, made public the following spring, traced the origins of some previously outlawed interrogation techniques to a course called Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Evasion (SERE) that is taught to the US military’s special forces. SERE exposes US personnel to the kinds of abuse and torture, including hypothermia, that American troops suffered at the hands of North Korean and Chinese forces during the Korean War. The program is meant to teach techniques for withstanding such treatment.

Frustrated over their inability to extract useful information from detainees captured in Afghanistan and elsewhere, US interrogators turned SERE inside-out. According to the Senate committee, the lessons in how to survive torture provided what military officials referred to as a “skill set” for administering the same techniques. [10]. That “skill set” included the induction of hypothermia; here is the US Navy’s description of how cold can cause death:

“Symptoms of hypothermia begin subtly with fatigue and loss of concentration. Ataxia [failure of muscle coordination], impaired judgment, oliguria [low urine production], and slight confusion may be subtle symptoms but may progress to stupor, coma, and resemble rigor mortis . . . The most important differential diagnosis is death; patients who are cold and could be resuscitated must be differentiated from patients who are cold because they are dead.” [11].

Of the ninety-eight detainees who died in US custody in 2002-06 [12] , it is not known for how many hypothermia was a contributing factor.

8. The report was published online (<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22614>) by the *New York Review of Books* as an appendix to Mark Danner, “The Red Cross Torture Report: What It Means,” 30 April 2009.

9. Steven Miles, “Medical ethics and the interrogation of Guantanamo 063,” *The American Journal of Bioethics* 7(2007): 5–11.

10. Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, "Inquiry into the Treatment of Detainees in U.S. Custody," 30 November 2008, [http://armed-services.senate.gov/Publications/Detainee Report Final_April 22 2009.pdf](http://armed-services.senate.gov/Publications/Detainee_Report_Final_April_22_2009.pdf)

11. "Prevention and Treatment of Heat and Cold Stress Injuries," US Navy Environmental Health Center, Technical Manual NEHC-TM-OEM 6260.6A, June 2007.

12. Hina Shamsi, *Command's Responsibility: Detainee Deaths in U.S. Custody in Iraq and Afghanistan* (New York: Human Rights First, 2006).