

Jeri Laber

*on torture*

It has been well over a year since we first learned about the torture by American soldiers in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison. Yet only low-level offenders have been tried and punished. Americans have been forced to confront difficult questions: Why were these abuses committed? Who is ultimately responsible?

As a human rights activist for the past thirty years, I have learned a lot about torture. My colleagues and I at Human Rights Watch have documented the use of torture in many parts of the world and have pressured offending governments to change their practices.

Torture is a gruesome subject. My friends and acquaintances, on the whole,

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have always shied away from discussing it with me because it was too upsetting. It was also too remote. Why concern themselves with gross abuses happening in far-flung parts of the world, about which there was little an ordinary American citizen could do? And anyway, don't those people – the torturers – have a distinct 'mentality' that enables them to torture? Nothing like that would ever happen here!

No wonder Americans were shocked and transfixed by the spectacle of American soldiers, ordinary men and women from towns across the United States, subjecting Iraqi detainees to painful and humiliating treatment – and recording the abuses on their camcorders with boastful glee. Who are these people? Who are their superiors? And who in our great democracy gave them permission to act as they did – with a sense of impunity, without any shame?

"Are you surprised?" friends asked me. My answer was yes . . . and no. On the one hand, I was surprised because such behavior goes against the basic principles of American democracy, against our belief in the rights of the individual and the sanctity of his or her person. I believe in those principles. They have made me proud to be an American.

Yet I am not surprised. Since September 11, our government has systematically chipped away at the guarantees that have kept our democracy sound – by refusing to apply the Geneva Conventions to detainees in Guantánamo, by using the U.S. Patriot Act to undermine our civil liberties at home, by saying that torture may be justified under certain circumstances because of our war against terrorism. In direct violation of international law and the Convention Against Torture, senior officials in the U.S. government stated that the presi-

dent has the authority to set aside such laws in wartime. The administration has engaged in a deliberate policy of permitting illegal, coercive interrogation techniques. It has then tried to cover up or ignore reports of torture and other abuse by U.S. soldiers, in Afghanistan, in Guantánamo, and in Iraq.

There is no such thing as 'lite' torture. Once the rules are bent, or lifted, despicable acts like those at Abu Ghraib become possible.

It was a 1975 article about torture that started me on my human rights career. Though it may seem surprising today, the use of torture in more than 150 countries around the world was not widely reported back then, and the facts were not known to even the most thoughtful and concerned people. Shocked by what I read and convinced that I had to do something about it, I became part of the nascent human rights movement in the United States. In 1978, I became a founder and then the long-term executive director of Helsinki Watch, which grew to be Human Rights Watch, the largest human rights organization based in the United States.

I will never forget my first interview with a torture victim. In 1977, I met with an Iranian poet and professor who had been imprisoned and tortured in 1973 by the Shah's secret police, the dreaded SAVAK. He described beatings that tore apart the soles of his feet, threats to rape his wife and daughter, and a mock execution in which he thought he was about to die. He depicted torture chambers with iron beds to which prisoners were tied and "roasted." He spoke of whips and electric prods that shocked the chest and genitals. He described how torturers hung their victims upside down and raped them.

In the years that followed, I went on to interview hundreds of torture victims.

In doing so, I learned to close off part of my feelings and not allow myself to fully imagine the experiences they described. Only then could I stay measured and disciplined in dealing with their terrible tales.

On my desk each day were dozens of grotesque torture descriptions. I had to pick those that I thought would be most effective for an article or a report, discarding others that were either not graphic enough or too ghastly for the average reader. It was a strange experience indeed to matter-of-factly edit a report, inserting the appropriate commas between sequential words like "beheaded, mutilated, and raped," while trying to ignore the import of the words themselves.

Most torture victims never fully recover from the experience. The most devastated are usually those who broke under torture and incriminated others. They live with intense pain – physical, emotional, and spiritual.

Other torture victims have amazed me with their strength to resist and rebound. There is a remarkable similarity in what they have to say:

"I could stand the pain because there was a part of me they couldn't touch."

"They tortured my body, but not my soul."

I have given a lot of thought to the psychology of the torturers, trying to understand how 'ordinary' people could commit such atrocities. Torture victims often describe their torturers as "family men" who left home each morning to do a job like everyone else. Occasionally, I also read reports by a few repentant torturers who had the courage to confess what they did and deplore their own actions.

Not every torturer is born a monster. Many are ambitious young people, recruited as soldiers into elite forces and

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specially trained for the dirty work in which they then feel trapped. Others, like those Americans in Iraq, are untrained and inexperienced, led to believe that they are serving a good purpose by 'softening up' prisoners for interrogation. They believe that their work is necessary in order to get information that will protect their country. But in the process of torturing other human beings, they destroy their own humanity and become overwhelmed with feelings of power that enable them to commit monstrous deeds.

Particularly instructive are the findings of Stanley Milgram, a Yale psychologist who, in 1974, attempted to prove that ordinary New Haven residents would follow orders to the point of administering life-threatening shocks to an innocent victim in the course of a supposed scientific experiment. While Milgram's research on obedience to authority may have been flawed, the results demonstrate the complexity of human behavior: people are not necessarily bad or good; the circumstances of the moment may influence their actions. Torturers, or potential torturers, may exist in every society: it is society's responsibility to pass laws to protect its citizens – sometimes from themselves.

Torture is destructive to all involved – to the victims, to the torturers, to those who ignore or deny what is happening. Lectures about what is right and what is wrong are not enough to stop it. Society needs principles, of course, but it also needs laws to protect its citizens. It needs strong institutions to enforce those laws and to punish all transgressors, including senior officials responsible for a high-level policy of abuse.

It is inexcusable for any government – and especially the government of the United States with its high moral precepts – to make exceptions to the laws

against torture. The U.S. government should change its policy and conduct a serious, independent investigation of the deplorable events that have so tarnished our country's reputation and self-respect.