

Sir,

I am writing in response to the review in *Torture*, vol. 15, No. 1, 2005¹ of the report on US torture by Physicians for Human Rights, reviewed by Gretchen Borchelt and Christian Pross. Furthermore I am writing in response to the PHR report itself, “Break them down”².

The report and the review miss important aspects of the use of psychology in US torture. This is not the fault of the authors because the US government has sought to hide the extent of the use of psychology and psychologists. The authors all accept that US torture, psychological or physical, is for interrogation; this is asserted by the US government, and accepted by the media and the general public. The facts are more horrible, but uncovering them is revealing about US intentions. If these facts become public, there will be even more US opposition to the torture.

Some of US torture is undoubtedly for interrogation – but some is for experiment with involuntary human subjects, and most is for control by terror. Specifically, torture in Guantanamo, Cuba, is for experiment, and torture in Iraq is for political control by terror.

About Cuba

We know there are many psychologists in the US military, and have been for years. The CIA’s manual on torture in interrogation, unearthed through the Freedom of Information Act in the 1970s, was clearly written by a psychologist – and there have been many revelations since then. We also know military psychologists read the literature of the torture treatment movement (see the bibliogra-

phy on the Iraq War Clinicians Website)³.

We can then assume they are familiar with the research of Saporta and van der Kolk in 1992 in which rats, living in conditions similar to Guantanamo, became self-destructive – just as Guantanamo prisoners have, with many documented attempts at suicide. Since prisoners’ behavior was predictable, this amounts variously to murder, or extra-judicial killing, or criminal negligence. That this is an experiment with humans also is consistent with the long-term imprisonment in an isolated place with no international oversight of prisoners who had first undergone complete interrogation in Afghanistan (see a book written by an interrogator: “The interrogators”, Little, Brown and Co., 2004). The experimental aspect to the torture also explains why many have been held there who did not have the slightest information, according to military personnel in media reports. Apparently they are not tortured for what they know, but for what they can teach.

About Iraq

Torture at Abu Ghraib and other prisons is policy, not accident, and it is for political control, as evidenced by several facts:

- 1) Very large numbers of prisoners go through Iraqi prisons, too many to interrogate – some 50,000 according to a New York Times report in March, 2005.
- 2) Very few have information, or are even interrogated, again according to media reports from US military sources.
- 3) Prisoners are not killed, they are released into the public where they can be seen after torture.
- 4) We have seen massive torture for control before – Central

America and other places come to mind.

5) Finally, the Stanford Prison Experiment of 1973 has been well known to psychologists for over 30 years – and it is this experiment that seems to inform the structure of Abu Ghraib.

In the Stanford Experiment, student volunteers, screened to eliminate pathology, were at random assigned roles as guards or prisoners, were suddenly but voluntarily placed in a specially built hidden jail, and were given no instructions as to how to act. In a few days psychologists had to stop the experiment, as the guards became increasingly aggressive and the most aggressive on each shift were tacitly allowed to set the bar for brutality. The psychologists discovered that placing normal people in a pathological situation – the stress of a prison – would produce what we recognize as torture. The advantage to the US Administration is that there are no orders to torture, so there is complete deniability – all that is needed is creation of a prison, made worse by having no outside observers, few guards and many prisoners, and placed in a war zone – and with a little indirect verbal encouragement, guards (and psychologists and doctors) will torture. It cannot be an accident that General Geoffrey Miller, formerly at Guantanamo, was put in charge of U.S. prisons in Iraq.

Torture for control by terror has always been to shore up long-term military control. The US is building its own military bases in Iraq. Together, these two facts imply a long occupation – and more torture. The choices need to be clearly revealed to the US public, and the world, which may wish to make other choices.

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References

1. Systematic Use of Psychological Torture by US Forces, *Torture 2005-1*; volume 15, p. 66-70
2. The report “Break Them Down, Systematic Use of Psychological Torture by US Forces” can in full extension be accessed at www.phrusa.org/research/torture/news_2005-05-01.html
3. www.ncptsd.va.gov/war/guide/index.html

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