

**Torture at Abu Ghraib:
The Terrorist Tactics of a Modern Democracy and
the Oppression of the Muslim “Other”**

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Anyone who has been tortured remains tortured. Anyone who has suffered torture will never again be at ease in the world, the abomination of the annihilation is never extinguished. Faith in humanity, already cracked with the first slap in the face, then demolished by torture, is never acquired again.

— Jean Amery

Torture, a word adeptly derived from the Latin “to twist,” is the dirty little secret of modernity. Because the general advancement of civilization supposedly left this particular brand of brutality behind in some dark age, the world was shocked and outraged when in 2004 images surfaced of American soldiers torturing Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison. A prisoner on a leash, prisoners naked and forced to mimic sexual acts on each other, a prisoner standing on a box, arms outstretched and hooded, wires dangling from his fingers—all this while American soldiers looked on smiling, mugging for the camera, flashing the thumbs up. This was no accident, no misrepresentation: it was undeniably torture, and no blurring of the definition could hide its truth. Members of the Bush administration immediately propagated the notion that the “abuse” was the product of a few sadistic “hillbillies,” who took advantage of lax supervision to act on their reprehensible desires. This story was not true.

The 2005 publication of *The Torture Papers*, a collection of

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government memos “arguing away the rules of torture” following the September 11th attacks, provided irrefutable evidence that the seven soldiers depicted in the infamous photos from Abu Ghraib were acting with approval from the highest levels of government (xiii). Interrogators at Abu Ghraib, as well as other sites, most notably in Afghanistan and at Guantanamo Bay, consciously exploited the Islamic faith of detainees, forcing them to perform acts that would alienate them from their God, their religion, and thus their community. This use of religious symbolism reflected a growing sophistication in torture tactics, as well as a shifting emphasis to psychological techniques. The capacity of the guards at Abu Ghraib carry out this kind of torture was the product of a process of psychological distancing of the kind that social psychologist Sudhir Kakar describes in his book *The Colors of Violence*. In this process, a society’s investment of hostility toward its enemy can ultimately result in the complete dehumanization of a stereotypical “other.” When internalized by individuals, the psychological distance created by this dehumanization can allow atrocities such as Abu Ghraib to be committed free from moral sanctioning.

Based on analysis of *The Torture Papers* and drawing primarily from Kakar’s theoretical framework, I will argue that the “War on Terror” has created a context in which Muslim suspects are seen as outside the dictates of international humanitarian law and, as a result, have suffered from newly developed and highly sophisticated techniques of torture. I will also draw upon other theorists, including Mark Juergensmeyer, William Cavanaugh, and Talal Asad, to clarify the underlying religious symbolism of torture and the environment in which it has evolved. In an attempt to gain information and assert American authority, the United States military and its interrogators employed tactics at Abu Ghraib, as well as in Afghanistan and at Guantanamo Bay, that consciously manipulated Islamic symbols and subverted Islamic values in an attempt to alienate Muslim detainees from their faith and their religious community.

Though explicitly outlawed by a number of international and regional treaties, torture remains prevalent. The first international efforts to curtail its use, the Third and Fourth Geneva Conventions, were largely a response to Nazi atrocities and were designed

predominantly to limit nations in their wartime conduct (Williams 16). The Geneva Conventions were followed by a number of specific treaties that elaborated upon its absolute unacceptability, including the United Nations Convention Against Torture, which declared that “no exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture.” The rigidity of this prohibition may be best reflected by its nonderogable status in human rights; it is thus *everyone’s* eternal right not to be tortured (Bagaric and Clarke 10). But UN and other international conventions are not easily enforced; ultimately, enforcement depends on the political will of each nation (Williams 17). A study performed by Amnesty International between 1997 and 2000 indicates that the will to enforce torture restrictions is absent in much of the global community. Torture or ill-treatment was reported in more than 150 countries; in 70 of these countries it was described as “widespread or persistent” (Bagaric and Clarke 13). Evidence indicates that since its ascension to preeminence following World War II, the United States has promoted a policy of torture that includes producing manuals, establishing operating centers worldwide, and distributing instruction to client states (Asad 115).

Torture has also evolved. No longer is inflicting physical pain the primary method of extracting information. Although the international conventions specify that torture requires the infliction of “severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental,” mental torture remains a vague concept. With little elaboration on what constitutes such abuse, even those countries that theoretically adhere to the mandates are able to undertake programs of extensive psychological torture. Among the many manuals distributed by the CIA, the *Human Resource Exploitation Manual* (1983) instructed interrogators on how to recognize a subject’s “internal motivational strength” and “exhaust” it so that he or she would yield the desired information (McCoy 139). A certain level of psychological sophistication is required to identify and exploit this inner reservoir. With the development of techniques of psychological torture, it appears that international mandates on torture have not evolved alongside the practices they are designed to control.

The Bush administration has gone even farther, arguing that the

circumstances of a war against a terrorist enemy requires a new set of rules. In a memo to Bush on January 25, 2002, Alberto Gonzalez wrote: "this new paradigm [of post-9/11 warfare] renders obsolete Geneva's strict limitations on questioning of enemy prisoners." Suspected terrorists now became "extra-legal persons outside the realm of humanitarian law." Because they were not state-sanctioned, enemy combatants in this new kind of war were not legitimate prisoners of war, and had sacrificed their nonderogable right under international law not to be tortured (Cavanaugh 320). Furthermore, "because their interrogation resistance strategies [had] become more sophisticated," a corresponding advancement in interrogation techniques was required for success (Greenberg 299). These "improvements," which came to include the use of torture, took advantage of the relaxed understanding of traditional guidelines like the Geneva Conventions

The persistence of torture is not adequately explained by any single global factor; it is the regrettable product of many. Advocates of torture often put forward a hypothetical "ticking time bomb scenario," in which thousands or potentially millions of lives are staked on the knowledge of one stubborn detainee. While such a scenario has never occurred, the popularization of such a myth, particularly by hit shows like Fox's "24," has opened the door for the justification of torture in entirely dissimilar situations. The perceived imminence of another terrorist attack, aided by devices such as the government's color-coded "threat level" chart, produces an analogous panic and rationale for employing "special" tactics. Popular culture also plays a role in the creation of the almost unfailing association of terrorism with Muslim and Middle Eastern men, a dangerous stereotype that easily fills the role of the "other."

In these ways, the atmosphere of the so-called "War on Terror" reflects the psychological distancing process described by Kakar. In Kakar's theory, a period of tension leads to the coalescence of social identity, as both "us" and "them" are increasingly defined by the group to which they belong. Members of the "other" are thus perceived purely in terms of their social identity and "shared category characteristics," instead of personal nature or individual qualities (42). This stereotyping is intensified when a conflict is construed as an epic clash of civilizations. According to Talal Asad in his recent book *On*

Suicide Bombing, this paradigm arose initially out of the Crusades when, for the first time, Europeans (with encouragement from the papacy) began to understand territorial battles between Christians and Muslims as a struggle between unified fronts of good and evil. In more recent times, because of their failure to modernize, Islamic civilizations have been broadly perceived as barbaric. A widespread misinterpretation of the concept of *jihad* has led many in the West to understand Islam itself as a “culture of death,” exemplified by suicide bombers and terrorist attacks, in which “Islamist violence came to represent a fanatical resentment against the West” (32). Hence “explanations in terms of religious (and especially Islamic) motive are still favored, partly because they provide...a model that lends itself to the discourse of the protection of civilization (committed to life) against barbarism (a love of death)” (56). Asad asserts that the liberal Western democracies’ history of colonial and interventionist policies have led to differential codes of conduct toward civilized and uncivilized enemies: “in a war against barbarians, the use of cruelty has always been more acceptable than it has been against civilized enemy populations” (34).

There is little doubt that the government has marked the current “War on Terror” with these themes of uncivilized hatred towards the modern and the civilized. President Bush declared in his address to Congress on September 20, 2001: “And what is at stake is not just America’s freedom. This is the world’s fight. This is civilization’s fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.” Shortly following the September 11 attacks, the Reverend Franklin Graham, who had delivered the benediction at Bush’s first inaugural address, declared that “Islam on a whole is evil,” and that “[i]t wasn’t Methodists flying into those buildings and it wasn’t Lutherans. It was an attack on our country by people of the Islamic faith” (Rothchild 129). Other evangelical preachers, such as Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and Jimmy Swaggart, supported these statements. While these conservative Christian leaders do not speak for all of the population, their views certainly reflected and influenced an “othering” mentality among the American public. It is also significant that after making his comments, Graham was invited to lead Good Friday services at the Pentagon, despite the objections of

Muslim employees. The invitation leads one to conclude that that the administration condoned, or at least did not openly disapprove of, his comments.

The other side of the condemnation of the Islamic other is the glorification of ourselves as Americans. From its inception, America has understood itself as unique. As William Dean argues in his essay “The Religious Critic and a Myth of America,” the United States believes itself “to be an exception among nations, the unique recipient of a special blessing from beyond history that summoned the nation to a unique errand within history” (173). While Dean argues that this “metamyth” is crumbling, many still uphold it, believing that America acts under its protection. He continues: “metamyths encourage a false escape from harsh truths, galvanize dangerous passions, and gain leverage through terrible instruments of warfare” (174). An especially striking example of this metamyth can be found in the public statements of Senator John McCain. McCain, who spent five and a half harsh years in a North Vietnamese prison camp, has become an outspoken opponent of the tactics of American interrogators, but his arguments have focused largely on their ineffectiveness rather than their brutality: “In my experience, abuse of prisoners often produces bad intelligence because under torture a person will say anything he thinks his captors want to hear- whether it is true or false—if he believes it will relieve his suffering.” Meanwhile, in this same memorandum in which he condemns torture, McCain explicitly dehumanizes the Al-Qaeda “others” by contrasting them with the glorified values of the United States: “the best sense of ourselves, that which is our greatest strength—that we are different and better than our enemies, that we fight for an idea, not a tribe, not a land, not a king, not a twisted interpretation of an ancient religion, but for an idea that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights” (Cavanaugh 317). By contrast, “Al Qaeda will never be influenced by international sensibilities or open to moral suasion. If ever the term ‘sociopath’ applied to anyone, it applies to them” (Cavanaugh 317).

According to Kakar, the stereotyping of the “other” leads inevitably to homogenization and depersonalization. In his theory, Kakar describes how in periods of tension individuals rediscover the negative feelings that he or she had been trained to direct towards the other.

Kakar asserts that society, often through the medium of family, teaches individuals to “disown” negative feelings and direct hostility towards the external other, instead of those on whom one depends. This externalizing of “hateful representations” is partly a process of identifying with one’s own group and partly the utilization of the other as a reservoir for anger and hostility that can result from rejection and emotional pain. Because the enemy is now a reservoir of our “unwanted selves,” we must distance ourselves psychologically, internalizing the concept that “the enemy should never be like us” (43).

Seen in this light, the metamyth of American exceptionalism and the demonization of the vague Muslim “other” can be understood as the reservoir of an unacknowledged American past. American use of torture has produced a sense of fundamental conflict, practicing a technique while condemning it at international forums. Still, powerful and outspoken members of the administration, the military, and the public portray the United States as a victim, choosing instead to direct the negative feelings and guilt of a morally questionable history on the enemy “other.” To the majority of American citizens, and certainly to the Bush administration, it is the radical enemy who commits atrocities, not our government and not our soldiers.

The final product of Kakar’s process of psychological distancing is a “progressive devaluation that can lead to dehumanization.” According to Kakar, stripping the enemy of human elements allows one to avoid guilt about harming or destroying them (44). Ehud Sprinzak similarly describes this process of moral disengagement in which enemies are “depersonalized and dehumanized. They are derogated to the ranks of the subhuman species. Dehumanization makes it possible for the radicals to be disengaged morally and to commit atrocities without second thought” (Bagaric and Clarke 93). This logic, in the arena of the “War on Terror,” can frighteningly often become: *because they are Muslim terrorists, they are not human*. Rush Limbaugh exemplifies this mindset with his statement that “they’re the ones who are sick. They’re the ones who are perverted. They are the ones who are subhuman debris, not the United States of America, and not our soldiers, and not our prison guards” (Nacos and Torres-Reyna 92). This dangerous logic of dehumanization was manifested at Abu Ghraib, where, as one detainee described in a sworn statement,

“they forced us to walk like dogs on our hands and knees. And we had to bark like a dog and if we didn’t do that, they start hitting us hard on our face and chest without mercy” (Bagaric and Clarke 93). Specialist Matthew Wisdom offers further evidence to this fact, quoting a statement by his superior, Staff Sergeant Ivan Frederick: “[L]ook what these animals do when you leave them alone for two seconds” (Williams 16). The pervasive feeling that the detainees were not human allowed the soldiers to morally disengage themselves and commit appalling crimes.

The eleven military investigations, twelve congressional hearings, and forty White House briefings that followed the scandal have produced a clear picture of the basic techniques employed at Abu Ghraib (McCoy 4). Since World War II, the CIA has gradually developed psychological torture techniques as part of its covert-warfare doctrine (presumably these techniques were covert because they left no visible scars on the victim’s body). The first element of this psychological torture is sensory disorientation, a “total assault on all the senses” that includes isolation, standing, heat and cold, light and dark, noise and silence. The aim of this first element is to isolate the detainee from all that he or she knows. The second aspect of the technique is self-inflicted pain, in which victims are made to feel responsible for their suffering. This is a conscious effort to create psychological humiliation (Bagaric and Clarke 7). In the case of detainees at Abu Ghraib, these aims of psychological isolation and humiliation were advanced by interrogators’ use of religious themes, in a conscious effort to alienate Muslims from their faith.

Detainees were often bound in painful positions or forced to assume stressful positions for long periods of time. The most famous of these stressful positions was revealed in the photograph of the prisoner nicknamed “Gilligan,” who was forced to stand hooded on a meals-ready-to-eat box with his arms outstretched. He was told that if he fell off his platform, he would be electrocuted by the wires attached to his fingers, toes, and genitals (Williams 32). Prisoners were paraded naked with plastic sandbags over their heads, a technique that combined the physical pain of restricted breathing with the psychological humiliation of nudity (McCoy 59). In a secret report issued by Major Antonio Taguba in March 2004, he described naked

prisoners being doused with cold water, beaten with broom handles, and intimidated by un-muzzled dogs. Most disturbingly, he cited sexual abuse in which prisoners were threatened with rape, sodomized with chemical lights, and forced to engage in sexually humiliating conduct for photographs (Bagaric and Clarke 17).

After the capture of Khalid Sheikh Mohammad in 2003, the *Washington Times* published an op-ed article by Jack Wheeler of the Freedom Research Foundation that outlined the method of torture he would employ on the mastermind of the September 11th plot:

After all the useful information had been extracted from his brain, KSM should be informed that he will now be killed after his body smeared in pig fat, that his dead body will be handled by women, and all the actions taken that prevent a Muslim from entering heaven upon death so that he dies believing he will never get the heavenly wine and virgins, but will burn in Hell instead. (Nacos and Torres-Reyna 95)

Wheeler's rant, though easy to dismiss as unwarranted racism and hatred, powerfully foreshadowed the manipulation of religious symbolism at Abu Ghraib. By isolating the Muslim detainee from his faith and humiliating him before his God, interrogators aimed to strip him of the strength he gained from piety and virtue. Ameen Sa'eed Al-Sheikh, Detainee-06 at Abu Ghraib, stated that "they ordered me to curse Islam, and because they started to hit my broken leg, I cursed my religion. They ordered me to thank Jesus that I'm alive. And I did what they ordered me. This is against my religion. They forced me to eat pork and they put liquor in my mouth" (Bagaric and Clarke 96). Erik Saar, an Army translator, quoted one interrogator's explanation of these techniques:

When [Fareek] returns to the cell in the middle of the night...he usually spends a great deal of time praying...I believe the problem is that it's too easy for him to retain strength when he returns to his cell...we've gotta find a way to break that, and I'm thinking that humiliation may be the way to go...I think we should make him feel so fucking dirty that he can't go back

to his cell and spend the night praying...we have to put up a barrier between him and his God. (Williams 62)

This interrogator recognized religion as a reservoir of his prisoner's strength; humiliation is thus employed to weaken him by isolating him from his religion, by degrading him before his God.

Perhaps the worst aspect of this religious degradation was the use of sexual themes to humiliate Muslim men. According to some theories, these methods were first utilized at Guantanamo Bay, after which they migrated to Afghanistan and then the prisons of Iraq (Williams 51). Among the more explicit tactics was the use of female interrogators, who often wore skimpy clothing, mockingly seduced the prisoners, rubbed their bodies against them, and even smeared them with dye resembling menstrual blood (Williams 61). Interrogators at Abu Ghraib evidently employed similar techniques, as one detainee reported in a sworn statement:

They stripped me naked, they asked me, "Do you pray to Allah?" I said, "Yes." They said, "Fuck you" and "Fuck him."

One of them told me he would rape me. He drew a picture of a woman on my back and makes me stand in a shameful position holding my buttocks. Someone else asked me "Do you believe in anything?" I said to him, "I believe in Allah." So he said, "But I believe in torture and I will torture you." (Greenberg and Dratel 524)

Nudity became a standard practice at Abu Ghraib, for it was recognized that in Islamic cultures it was exceptionally humiliating for a man to be naked in another's presence (McCoy 139). Janis Karpinski, one of the seven 'hillbillies' indicted on charges of torture, objected: "Do you know what this does in an Arab culture? Do you know what you're doing? This is the equivalent of castrating them in public" (McCoy 132). Kasim Mahaddi Hilas described his experience of sexual humiliation: "they stripped me of all my clothes, even my underwear. They gave me women's underwear, that was rose color with flowers [on] it and they put the bag over my face...most days I was wearing nothing else" (Williams 11). Prisoners were forced to masturbate and

to appear as though they were engaging in homosexual acts with each other, in defiance of Islamic law; sometimes they were photographed in these positions. A detainee at Abu Ghraib described this experience:

[T]hey made us get on our hands and knees and they started to pile us one on top of the other...When we were naked he ordered us to stroke, acting like we're masturbating and when we start to do that he would bring another inmate and sit him down on his knees in front of the penis and take photos which looked like this inmate was putting the penis in his mouth. (Greenberg and Dratel 516)

In most Islamic nations, particularly those under Sharia (Islamic law), homosexuality is explicitly forbidden and highly stigmatized. Six nations (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Mauritania, Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen) still maintain the death penalty for same-sex intercourse; in others, homosexuality is often punished with imprisonment or beating (Van Dijk 34). American interrogators' use of homosexuality was thus a special effort to stigmatize the detainees. An army translator who was stationed at Abu Ghraib stated that he was required to translate the phrases: "Are you gay? Do you like what is happening to you? Are you all gays? You must like that position." (Greenberg and Dratel 499). One prisoner reported an interrogator asking him "Are you married?" and then saying "If your wife saw you like this, she would be disappointed" (Greenberg and Dratel 522). Forcing detainees to participate in homosexual acts alienated them not only from their own faith, but also from the larger Muslim community, in which they undoubtedly feared they would not be accepted again (Nacos and Torres-Reyna 96).

It is in this context of stigmatization that it is important to consider the emergence of photography as another tool of torture at Abu Ghraib. While torturers have always acted to create an asymmetrical power relationship, producing evidence of their victims' humiliation serves to both extend this power and to further degrade. A victim of torture who has been photographed committing shameful acts can never fully put the ordeal behind him, for the torturer continues to hold the power as long as he is able to release the images to the victims' families or

community. Even if the family or community recognizes that the acts were forced, the stigma associated with them will almost always lead to some level of alienation. At Abu Ghraib, where the tactics explicitly targeted Islamic values and symbols, the documenting of forced homosexual acts created a threat of broadcasting the shame of the tortured to their larger religious community.

In his essay “Making Enemies,” William Cavanaugh describes torture as a kind of theater in which people are forced to fulfill certain roles, reinforcing a socially imaginative process in which enemies are created. The photos from Abu Ghraib displayed the detainees as conforming to our preconceptions of Kakar’s “other”: the terrorist as depraved subhuman (313). In creating these images for display, the interrogators at Abu Ghraib made use of the same symbolic mechanisms that are intended by terrorism, in which private, individual acts of violence are meant to carry public, political meaning. In “Theater of Terror,” Mark Juergensmeyer describes the symbolism of terrorist acts as performative violence, as “constructed events” which are “mind-numbing, mesmerizing theater...at the center stage are the acts themselves—stunning, abnormal, and outrageous...carried out in a way that that graphically displays the awful power of violence—set within grand scenarios of conflict and proclamation” (124). Torture, like acts of terror, can “send two messages at the same time” communicating personally with an individual but also sending a broader message to this individual’s group (145). In the case of the “War on Terror,” the message sent by the United States government and military might just be: we will do anything to win.

In the context of a frantic “War on Terror,” American soldiers and interrogators psychologically distanced themselves from an enemy they perceived as barbaric. In a paradigm of good and evil, clashing Muslim and Christian civilizations, the detainees at Abu Ghraib became the ancient “other,” the reservoir for the negative feelings and hostility of the torturers and their nation alike. Acting with approval from high levels of government and utilizing sophisticated tactics, these soldiers manipulated Islamic symbols and values in a conscious effort to isolate the detainees from their religious identities, their deepest source of strength. By degrading them before their God, their religious community, and themselves, interrogators hoped to gain information

and win the ceaseless “War on Terror.”

The smiling face and the man on a leash. The thumbs-up next to a pile of naked humanity. The publication of the photographs from Abu Ghraib revealed an inherent conflict in the American worldview. Americans proclaim that there is an “us” and a “them.” *We* spread peace and democracy. *They* fly planes into buildings. *We* remove a dictator. *They* blow up our humvees. But what happens when the roles are not simply blurred, but reversed? What happens when we are undeniably the perpetrators of atrocities? What happens when the United States uses torture and we become the terrorists?

In *On Suicide Bombing*, Asad writes: “there is no such thing as a clash of civilizations because there are no self-contained societies to which civilizational values correspond,” and yet he recognizes that “the idea of autonomous civilization is difficult to shake” (14). In a world so delicately intertwined, the United States can no longer fail to recognize the values that bind us all. Adherence to the treaties that the self-described democratic countries drafted seems a simple initial demand. Human rights cannot be reserved only for the “civilized.” Abuse of these rights threatens each individual. The photos at Abu Ghraib embody everything the United States claims to abhor: the oppression of the innocent, the shameless abuse of power, the inhumanity of that faceless man under the hood. The unwanted self, the guilt of American history, is suddenly circulating the globe, and American rhetoric is powerless to stop it. The secret is out.

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