

# Editorial

## Torturers' Charter

Cracks are appearing in the foundation stones of our civilisation. Long held taboos about national sovereignty have already fallen, outside the solitary bastion of the megapower. All other sovereignty is qualified if not abrogated. Now, the universal prohibition of torture is the latest victim of agnostic questions from new realists. On January 11<sup>th</sup> *The Economist* opened its first leader with the question: 'Is torture ever justified?' With some diffidence, *The Economist* answered 'No'. But perhaps, it thought, sleep deprivation, lengthy interrogations, the use of the truth serum, might be defined as falling outside the domain of torture.

What provoked *The Economist* to think these thoughts? There has been a controversy in *The Washington Post*, triggered by an important article which appeared on December 26th 2002.

'Deep inside the forbidden zone at the US-occupied Bagram airbase in Afghanistan, around the corner from the detention centre and beyond the segregated clandestine military units, sits a cluster of metal shipping containers protected by a triple-layer of concertina wire. The containers hold the most valuable prizes in the war on terrorism – captured Al Qaeda operatives and Taliban commanders.'

This valuable cargo seems to have been made for ill-treatment. Non-cooperators are kept standing or kneeling for hours on end, hooded or clad in spray painted goggles. At times they are held in painful or awkward positions and deprived of sleep with a twenty-four hour bombardment of lights, under 'stress and duress' techniques.

By contrast, co-operators are given modest creature comforts, friendly interrogators and, 'in some cases, money'. Some of the non-cooperators are given over to foreign intelligence services who are far less squeamish about torture than the Americans are supposed to be. This process of hand-over is called 'rendering'. Not all non-cooperative prisoners need to be 'rendered' because the Americans maintain a number of detention centres where the due process which should rule in the rest of the United States does not hold sway. The off-limits ground in Bagram is one of these, and the island of Diego Garcia is another. American officials superintend most of the interrogations, we are told, especially those of senior captives. Smaller fry are handed over to less squeamish interrogators in Jordan, Egypt or Morocco, together with lists of the questions to which the CIA requires answers. These 'extraordinary renditions' are subject to no legal controls, although the appointed torturers have frequently been the subject of angry denunciations by American human rights organisations.

'According to US officials, nearly 3000 suspected Al Qaeda members and their supporters have been detained world-wide since September 11th 2001. About 625 are at the US military's confinement facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Some officials

estimated that fewer than 100 captives have been rendered to third countries. Thousands have been arrested and held with US assistance in countries known for brutal treatment of prisoners, the officials said.'

The head of the CIA's counter-terrorist centre is Cofer Black. 'There was a before 9/11, and there was an after 9/11' he said. 'After 9/11 the gloves come off.' Part of the glove stripping process is that of rendering. 'We don't kick the shit out of them. We send them to other countries so they can kick the shit out of them.'

Mind altering drugs are by no means the only devices employed in the administration of such kickings. Systematic deprivation of sleep, selective withholding of pain-killing drugs for wounded people, and other more or less 'acceptable' cruelties are by no means the only standard treatment for rendered victims. Before they are rendered, says *The Washington Post*, captives are often softened up by MPs and US army special forces troops who beat them up and confine them in tiny rooms. Commonly they are blind-folded and thrown into walls, tied up in painful postures, exposed to loud noises, and an unremitting tone of intimidation. Prisoners taken for transport are 'packaged', fitted with hoods and gags, and often tied to stretchers with duct tape.

How does rendering proceed? The CIA has no standard formula for dealing with the cases it exports. Sometimes, for instance in Saudi Arabia, 'we are able to observe through one-way mirrors the live investigations' said a senior US official. 'In others, we usually get summaries. We will feed questions to the investigators'. The Saudis have been very helpful to American enquiries, as was acknowledged by George Tenet in his speech of December 11th 2002. But, says *The Post*, Saudi Arabia is suspected of withholding certain information which might prove embarrassing to the Saudi royal family. This explains the increasing tendency for rendition to be moved from Riyadh to Egypt. Rendition to Jordan is comparatively popular because the Jordanians are considered to be very professional interrogators. 'The most frequently alleged methods of torture include sleep deprivation, beatings on the soles of the feet, prolonged suspension with ropes in contorted positions and extended solitary confinement' said the 2001 report of the State Department on Human Rights in Jordan.

Morocco is another popular centre for rendition, notwithstanding a recent official ban on torture, which human rights organisations believe to be more honoured in the breach than the observance. Another destination which provoked strong protests in Germany was Syria which accepted the rendition of a Syrian who also held German citizenship.

Bob Woodward and his colleagues, who contributed to this report, gave rise to a considerable controversy. Prominent among the contributors was Professor Alan Dershowitz, who called for the legalisation of torture to enable it to be controlled. Dershowitz is a civil libertarian, who wishes to put an end to the blind-fold culture of American interrogators, forcing them to apply for a torture order or warrant in each individual case where tortures are to be applied. The argument for such control is based on the presumption that illicit torture has been

widespread and continuing. Since the CIA has beyond doubt been involved in training torturers in a variety of countries in Latin America and further afield, what Dershowitz says will ring true for many people.

‘If anyone has any doubt that our CIA, over time, has taught people to torture, has encouraged torture, has probably itself tortured in extreme cases, I have a bridge to sell you in Brooklyn.’

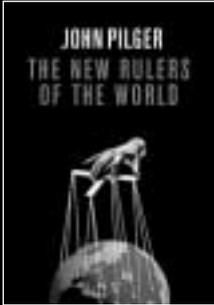
But the question is not whether we want to buy Professor Dershowitz’s bridge. The legitimisation of torture would undoubtedly mean an exponential increase in its use, given the present culture of rabid irrationalism. Of course, what is known to everyone who has worked in the field of rehabilitation of victims of torture is that the torture is not about the pursuit of information, but about the humiliation of its victims. It seeks to break their will to resist. It applies cruelty for the explicit purpose of de-humanising its victims. This purpose does not take account of or comprehend its unintended result which is the dehumanisation of the torturers themselves, and those who employ them.

It would be unwise to say that no truthful information is ever extracted by the administration of pain. But what is absolutely plain is that torture normally generates false confessions, because people will say anything to stop the pain, even if only intermittently.

After the war on Iraq there will be many more prisoners ready to be tortured, whether by ‘our own’ specialists, or by suitable foreign volunteers from among the lackeys who are willing to assist in rendition. Cruelty will be in season. How will this conduce to the restoration of peace, or the development of human rights, or the growth of civilisation? We are about to establish new schools and universities of brutality, to which the only antidote known to us at this time is human sympathy and solidarity. This will be generated in the peace movement, or nowhere.

*Ken Coates*

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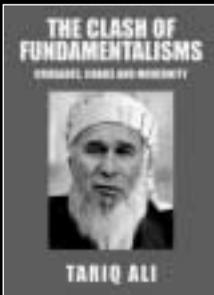
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