American Duplicity and Twisting in Our Own Tortured Noose

So the United States Senate has released its report highlighting extreme and supposedly ‘abhorrent’ techniques used on terrorist targets after 9/11 to glean greater intelligence and information. Since that release there has been an orgy of oscillating condemnation/hand-wringing with rationalization/chest-beating, depending on whom you speak with. What strikes me more is the whole surreal ridiculousness of this false debate.

I say false debate because in some ways this just highlights how dementedly odd Americans can be about their own people, country, government, and its foreign affairs. Let’s just break this down in simple terms: we are talking about torture. There really cannot be surprise at this as a revelation. Indeed, there have been so many innuendos, hints, semi-admissions, and quasi-reports over the last decade testifying to the fact that United States in all likelihood engaged in what was called ‘forced interrogation techniques.’ So the shock we are reading about today really cannot be about torture as an action in and of itself. At least, no SINCERE shock can be about that. Anyone sincerely shocked at that confirmation is either delusional or horrifically naïve when it comes to this period that is supposedly now over, the one we used to call the Global War on Terror. So the ‘shock’ must be to learn that the US did, you know, like, REAL torture. You know, like, the kind those barbarians and heathens from uncivilized places do. You know, those SCARY people in the desert who cut off people’s heads and stone women to death for no reason at all.

But what does this thinking actually imply in real terms? It implies, intentionally or ignorantly I do not know, a sense of expectation that if the US was going to engage in torture, then it would somehow find a ‘more palatable version’ of torture so as to allow the American people to sleep well at night. We must still believe in the narrative that while the US is going to fight tooth and nail against these global non-state actors bent on using terrorism as their chief tactic, it is NOT going to fight in a way that would make us as a people squeamish or feel sick. For those of us involved in this field, in the world of global politics and intelligence studies in any real experiential way, you know instantly how ridiculous this is. Torture is heinous in ALL forms. How can it not be? How can it be officially designated as torture and not be heinous? And trust me when I say that is not a moral judgment. I am not communicating a liberal humanitarian plea for greater peace and understanding. Please take note: torture is SUPPOSED to be nasty and brutish. Its very essence has to be heinous as a default. If you don’t believe that, by all means, go and volunteer for some of those ‘more palatable’ versions and see how you feel afterwards.

Perhaps the only thing more incredulous than the public incredulity on American torture techniques after 9/11 is the bogus semantics game being played out with the media now in the report’s aftermath. “Yes we did torture. No. Sorry. We did ‘EITs.’ Yes there were measures taken too far and deemed abhorrent even by the American side. But they were valuable necessities that saved lives. Well, ok, maybe they didn’t, but surely they caused the offering of intelligence that otherwise would not have been obtained. Well, alright, maybe I cannot prove that was actually the case, a direct causal link, but I am pretty sure SOME information EVENTUALLY came out because of the atmosphere created by that tor…I mean, EITs.” In another time and place this would most assuredly end up fodder for Monty Python or Saturday Night Live.
The effectiveness of torture to glean information has long been established as dodgy, at best. So perhaps the more uncomfortable question is ‘to what purpose does a country engage in torture?’ Is it to obtain information or enact vengeance? Again, this is not a treatise trying to sympathize with the people in Guantanamo Bay. Despite what many groups liked to agitate, the vast majority of people in Gitmo did not happen to be happy-go-lucky barely-shaving young men who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. I am not offering a defense of terrorists or would-be terrorists or possible terrorists. No, what disturbs me most is this consistent inanity by the United States to just not admit that in the end it is a state in the global system just like any other state. It puts on its state-pants one leg at a time like every other country. This is not actually news to the rest of the world. Allies and adversaries alike have long considered the United States exactly and only that. The belief in being something other, in being something better than, is a particularly unique American conceit. Don’t get me wrong: other countries have beliefs about ‘specialness’ or ‘uniqueness’ or being different from other countries. This is natural. But in all of my travels and talks around the world it is clear that only America thinks it is different in a way that should demand others see it as so different and special that they should copy and be like us. We push others into this fantasy world that no one else believes in but still we demand that our wishes be honored. And no one does. But we convince ourselves they do. Fantasy. Pure unadulterated fantasy.

This is why we see scenes like today with CIA chief Brennan, who can admit certain techniques were harsh, certain officers got out of hand, and bad things were done, but cannot actually physically utter the word ‘torture,’ as if his refusal to utter it will somehow make the reality of it disappear or be ignored by everyone else. It is all just so….dissatisfying. There is no strength or conviction in this action and behavior. The fact of the matter is the United States was attacked by a terrorist group on 9/11 which openly declared war against America. That group was non-state, highly amorphous, fluid, and located in many different countries without any formal military designation or assignment. And let’s not forget one simple, true, and honest fact: the United States was hurt and angry. Even today there are few countries, if any, which would deny the United States its pound of flesh when it comes to enacting ‘justice/revenge’ on ANY groups connected to 9/11 or possibly capable of becoming a new threat to reenact something like 9/11. It is not the report that documents American torture that upsets the world and makes it shake its head in wonderment/disgust. No. I honestly believe most countries that have fought the nasty and pernicious war that fighting terrorists completely understand the flawed decision-making and emotionality that leads to torture (even if they find the practice abhorrent). What bothers most countries, rather, is this sad and weak song-and-dance after the fact, trying desperately to dodge what is ALREADY IN AN OFFICIAL US SENATE REPORT TO THE MEDIA. It is the gamesmanship of a mentally-challenged state. And THAT is the scariest part of all: because whether that mental deficiency is manipulatively strategic or not, it means the United States to many can just never be relied upon to work with ANY reality if it involves American mistakes or misadventures. It is that double-standard which hurts American standing far more than any actual admission of conducting torture.

Other countries are not condemning us. Our actions are not condemning us. But our fantastical obfuscation damned us beyond measure.

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