

TORTURED TRUTHS

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

TORTURED TRUTHS

<https://www.e-ir.info/2009/06/11/tortured-truths/>

HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, JUN 11 2009

The debate in the United States over the use of “enhanced interrogation techniques” on terror detainees has an odd twist. Many of those who argue that these techniques are torture and therefore that they should be condemned, also insist that torture doesn’t work, that it doesn’t produce useful intelligence. Should we assume that if torture worked they would find it acceptable? Or perhaps they are so sure that it doesn’t work, they merely want to take away the only possibly valid argument of a Bush apologist, that the use torture was necessary in early years after the 9/11 attacks in order to save lives.

But do we know that torture doesn’t work? I think the evidence implies that it does. First, French accounts of their war in Algeria admit that torture was used and was productive in the sense of gaining useful operational intelligence. To hide the use of torture, most of the Algerians subjected to it were killed after they had given up their friends and the terrorist networks in which they had functioned. Second, we know that American prisoners in all recent wars—Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf war and Iraq— have been tortured by their captors, and most of those who survived the experience have admitted that they broke at some point under torture. Any false information they gave was easily checked against the information offered by other prisoners. The captives did resist, but at some point most no longer could hold out. Operational practice surely assumes that captives give up codes and other important information.

Our military asks for resistance, telling our forces to yield on capture only what is required by the Geneva Convention. It also trains airmen and others in techniques to avoid giving up important information. But the military accepts that even toughest can break under harsh physical and psychological pressure. There is no expectation that our service personnel will sacrifice their lives in these situations although some surely have.

Finally, we know that torture is a constant presence in warfare, most especially in counter-insurgency operations. Terrible things happen in wars. But warfare is also a learning process where participants try to avoid repeating the mistakes of their own experience and that of others. Some torture no doubt is done for the sadistic pleasure of the captors, but not all of it. If it only generated false information or caused enemies to resist harder, torture would not persist as an official practice.

Some nations, the United States included, foreswear torture. We ban the use of torture not to protect our own forces. As I noted, captured American have been subject to torture in all recent wars no matter how well behaved we have been. We avoid torture not because we think it doesn’t work. It likely does. We do so because our security doesn’t depend upon small pieces of information beaten out of prisoners.

The Bush lawyers were dealing with a situation where it seemed as if our security did depend upon what information a few captives would yield. Waterboarding and sleep deprivation may or may not be torture, but labeled enhanced

TORTURED TRUTHS

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

interrogation techniques by the lawyers they offered the promise for producing actionable information at a time when fears of further terror attacks were great. The previous administration's mistake appeared to have been not being aggressive enough in pursuing the terrorists.

I feel sorry for the Bush lawyers. The crisis has mitigated; the fears of further attacks have lessened. We don't need to say that torture is ineffective or counter-productive. We need only say that we don't want to use the toughest techniques on our prisoners and be thankful that we don't think that we need to do so.

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.