

By Roy Eidelson

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The infamous U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay turns 22 this month. Its ugly history now spans an entire generation. For those who might not remember, on January 11, 2002, General Richard Myers described Guantanamo's first arrivals as "people that would gnaw hydraulic lines in the back of a C-17 to bring it down" and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld chimed in, "To be in an eight-by-eight cell in beautiful, sunny Guantanamo Bay,

Cuba, is not inhumane.”

Since then, 780 Muslim men and boys [have been detained](#) there; 30 still remain imprisoned today. And despite the repeated claims from the Bush Administration that only the “worst of the worst” became Guantanamo detainees, we now know that a very high percentage had no connection to terrorism. They were simply rounded up by local forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan and then handed over to U.S. forces in exchange for hefty [bounty payments](#)

. In fact, hardly any of those brought to the island prison camp—and subjected to years of abusive treatment and confinement—have ever faced charges or trials.

By the time Guantanamo opened, four months after the horrific terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, there were already clear signs that our government’s new “war on terror” would be propelled by gloves-off vengeance, with little respect for human rights and open disdain for international law. It’s hardly surprising, then, that Guantanamo detainees were soon subjected to severe isolation, sleep deprivation, forced nudity, sexual and cultural humiliation, hooding, 20-hour interrogations, and other forms of [degrading mistreatment](#) .

Not so readily anticipated was the fateful and misguided decision by leaders of the American Psychological Association (APA)—the world’s largest organization of psychologists—to quickly [embrace](#)

the so-called war on terror. They seemingly saw it as an opportunity to heighten the profession’s profile and bring psychologists closer to the center of U.S. national security operations. And soon thereafter, psychologists were on the front lines at

[Guantanamo](#)

and elsewhere, contributing to a systematic plan of detainee abuse and torture—while for years the APA’s leadership

[insisted](#)

, contrary to evidence, that psychologists helped to keep these operations “safe, legal, ethical, and effective.”

It took a decade of dedicated advocacy by so-called “dissident” psychologists (I count myself among them), opposed at every turn by APA leaders, to eventually bring meaningful ethical reforms to the organization. After a careful months-long [independent review](#) , in 2015 [new policies](#)

were approved that now prohibit psychologists’ participation in national security interrogations and also place limits on psychologists at Guantanamo—and at similar sites that violate international human rights law—so that they can only work directly on behalf of the detainees

or as healthcare providers for military personnel.

I recount this disturbing history in my recent book [*Doing Harm: How the World's Largest Psychological Association Lost Its Way in the War on Terror*](#) (McGill-Queen's University Press). As I emphasize there, troubling ramifications persist, both for the APA and for Guantanamo. For the APA, the organization's leadership has failed to take steps that would demonstrate an unyielding commitment to do-no-harm ethics and firm opposition to the ethically fraught weaponization of the profession. Consider two examples.

First, the APA has [refused](#) to offer an official apology to the hundreds of prisoners who suffered grievous harm at Guantanamo (and elsewhere) while APA leaders chose to [cast doubt](#) on credible reports implicating psychologists in their abuse. That apology is long overdue. Just as importantly, the APA apparently has also [rejected](#) recommendations that it make regular financial contributions to non-profit organizations focused on providing much-needed support to torture survivors and their families.

Second, influential operational military psychologists—with support from the Department of Defense, defense contractors, and some APA leaders—continue to deny or distort the record of abuse at Guantanamo and the APA's own deeply flawed responses to it. Nevertheless, the APA recently endorsed a set of [ill-defined](#) professional practice [guidelines](#) that are likely to *expand* the roles available to these psychologists in the national security arena—even if those activities are [designed](#) to dispense with informed consent, to inflict harm, and to avoid monitoring by outside ethics boards.

As for Guantanamo, the prison camp remains open. It lingers as a present-day stain, one that represents the moral abyss into which this country fell. Indeed, after visiting Guantanamo just last year, the United Nations special rapporteur on counterterrorism and human rights [reported](#) that current conditions there amount to “ongoing cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment” and may also “meet the legal threshold for torture.” Meanwhile, trials for the alleged plotters of the 9/11 attacks, and justice for 9/11 families, remain indefinitely [on hold](#), contaminated by evidence obtained through torture.

And so then here we are now, 22 years later. Sadly, there is so much we still need to learn.

Note. For readers interested in more thoroughly investigating the tragic history of Guantanamo and the broader “war on terror,” I humbly offer two recommendations.

The first is the Interactive Timeline [“Torture, Psychology, and the War on Terror”](#) that I created with Coalition for an Ethical Psychology colleagues. It includes many key events, with hyperlinks, from 9/11/2001 to the present day.

The second recommendation is the following list of outstanding books and films. When I was writing *Doing Harm*, I found all of the resources below (and many others as well) to be tremendously valuable.

Books

*Spencer Ackerman, *Reign of Terror: How the 9/11 Era Destabilized America and Produced Trump* (New York: Viking, 2021)

*Mansoor Adayfi, *Don't Forget Us Here: Lost and Found at Guantanamo* (New York: Hachette Books, 2021)

*Moazzam Begg, *Enemy Combatant: My Imprisonment at Guantánamo, Bagram, and Kandahar* (New York: New Press, 2007)

*Mark Fallon, *Unjustifiable Means: The Inside Story of How the CIA, Pentagon, and US Government Conspired to Torture* (New York: Regan Arts, 2017)

*Karen Greenberg, *The Least Worst Place: Guantanamo's First 100 Days* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009)

*Lisa Hajjar, *The War in Court: Inside the Long Fight Against Torture* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press)

*David Hicks, *Guantanamo: My Journey* (North Sydney: Random House Australia, 2010)

*Jane Mayer, *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals* (New York: Doubleday, 2008)

*Steven H. Miles, *Oath Betrayed: Torture, Medical Complicity, and the War on Terror* (New York: Random House, 2006)

*Joshua E.S. Phillips, *None of Us Were Like This Before: American Soldiers and Torture* (New York: Verso, 2010)

*Philippe Sands, *Torture Team: Rumsfeld's Memo and the Betrayal of American Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

*Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, *The Forever Prisoner* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2022)

*Larry Siems, *The Torture Report: What the Documents Say About America's Post-9/11 Torture Program* (New York: OR Books, 2011)

*Mohamedou Ould Slahi, *Guantanamo Diary (Restored Edition)*. (New York: Back Bay Books, 2017)

*Clive Stafford Smith, *Eight O'Clock Ferry to the Windward Side* (New York: Nation Books, 2007)

*Andy Worthington, *The Guantanamo Files: The Stories of 774 Detainees in America's Illegal Prison* (London: Pluto Press, 2007)

Films

**The Torture Question* (2005), directed by Michael Kirk

**Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007), directed by Alex Gibney

**Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* (2007), directed by Rory Kennedy

**Torturing Democracy* (2008), produced by Washington Media Associates

**Doctors of the Dark Side* (2013), directed by Martha Davis

**Expert Witness: Health Professionals on the Frontline Against Torture* (2016), directed by Martha Davis

**The Report* (2019), directed by Scott Z. Burns

**Eminent Monsters* (2020), directed by Stephen Bennett

**The Mauritanian* (2021), directed by Kevin Macdonald

**The Forever Prisoner* (2021), directed by Alex Gibney

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