

By Stephen Soldz

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A recent pair of articles by Marc Ambinder of the [Atlantic](#) has shed new light upon activities in the secret so-called "black jail" on the Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. Among other aspects, these new revelations suggest that psychologists may be playing a major role inside the facility, raising questions about the reasons for American Psychological Association (APA) lobbying activities in support of the agency that Ambinder reports is running the detention center.

In recent months the [Washington Post](#), [New York Times](#), and [BBC](#) reported on a secret prison on fringes of the Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. Referred to by former prisoners as the "black jail," this institution is reportedly a site where prisoner abuse is regular and systematic. The [BBC](#) reported that all nine former prisoners they interviewed:

told consistent stories of being held in isolation in cold cells where a light is on all day and night.

The men said they had been deprived of sleep by US military personnel there.

Thus, we can assume that [psychological torture techniques](#) of isolation, sleep deprivation, and hypothermia are routine aspects of treatment inside the facility.

The [Washington Post](#) provided additional details through interviews with two youths imprisoned in the black jail. As one young man, Rashid, who is "younger than 16" described:

At the beginning of his detention, he was forced to strip naked and undergo a medical checkup in front of about a half-dozen American soldiers. He said that his Muslim upbringing made such

a display humiliating and that the soldiers made it worse.

"They touched me all over my body. They took pictures, and they were laughing and laughing," he said. "They were doing everything."

He said he lived in a small concrete cell that was slightly longer than the length of his body. Food was tossed in a plastic bag through a slot in the metal door. Both teenagers said that when they tried to sleep, on the floor, their captors shouted at them and hammered on their cells.

When summoned for daily interrogations, Rashid said, he was made to wear a hood, handcuffs and ear coverings and was marched into the meeting room. He said he was punched by his interrogators while being prodded to admit ties to the Taliban; he denied such ties. During some sessions, he said, his interrogator forced him to look at pornographic movies and magazines while also showing him a photograph of his mother.

"I was just crying and crying. I was too young," Rashid said. "I didn't know what a prison looks like or what a prison is."

Ambinder received confirmation from the Defense Department of the existence of this secret detention center at Bagram that Department had previously [consistently denied](#) existed.

[Ambinder has a picture of the facility

[here](#)

.] He reports that the center is run, not by the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), as was

[previously reported](#)

, but by the Defense Intelligence Agency's (DIA) Defense Counterintelligence and Human Intelligence Center (DCHC) in course of its providing intelligence services for Task Force 714. For those with long memories, DCHC is essentially where the Defense Department stuffed the old Counterintelligence Field Activity (CIFA) after the latter was "disbanded" due to several major scandals involving

[spying on Americans](#)

[and](#)

[fraud](#)

connected with former Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham.

It isn't clear if it really makes a difference if the "black jail" is run by JSOC or DCHC. After all, Task Force 714, which DCHC is serving, is itself a [JSOC special ops](#) force:

McRaven runs a secretive detachment of Special Forces known as Task Force 714 — once commanded by McChrystal himself — that the NSC staffer described as “direct-action” units conducting “high-intensity hits.” In an email, Sholtis said that because Task Force 714 was a “special ops organization” he “can’t go into much detail on authorities, etc.” But the NSC staffer — who called McRaven “McChrystal Squared” — said Task Force 714 was organized into “small groups of Rangers going wherever the hell they want to go” in Afghanistan and operating under legal authority granted at the end of the Bush administration that President Obama has not revoked.

[Scott Horton has made a similar point [here](#) .]

As Ambinder reports, the Defense Department now admits that this secret Afghan prison uses interrogation techniques from the [Army Field Manual's infamous](#) Appendix M. This appendix [authorizes abusive techniques](#)

, [including](#) sleep deprivation, sensory deprivation, and "environmental manipulation [think freezing someone or blinding light] that often amount to torture.

Consistent with the multitudinous reports of severe abuse in the black jail, Ambinder reports that there is a top secret Special Action Program authorizing DCHC interrogations. As Jeff Kaye pointed out in an [emptywheel](#) comment, if only Appendix M-based techniques -- which are covered by the Army Field Manual -- are used, why the need for a Special Action Program? Thus, we must wonder what, exactly, DCHC is doing at Bagram and other sites. Whatever it is, it apparently isn't something they want us, the public, to know about.

For those who think that President Obama banned torture centers like this, think again. Obama's Executive Order only banned *CIA* secret prisons. This administration thus apparently intended from the beginning to maintain its torture facility, only under a Defense Department rather than CIA label.

Further information about the black jail is provided in a [follow-up post](#) , where Ambinder provides this description of the “black prison”:

From what information I've been able to gather, the interrogation environment is much like a social science laboratory, *with psychologists and experts in human behavior* looking for clues to see who might know more than they do, alternating with interrogators trained to ferret out actionable intelligence information. [emphasis added]

If the detention facility is being run as a “social science laboratory,” it raises concerns that the psychologists and others may be conducting research on the detainees without these detainees’ consent. As a result of the abusive research of the Nazi doctors and research on poor black men in this country denied by the US Public Health Service well-known treatments for syphilis as they got sick and died in the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, informed consent has been a requirement in this country for all but the most benign research for decades. Thus, Ambinder’s report raises the prospect that detainees in the black jail may be subjects of otherwise banned research procedures.

Wherever psychologists are involved in national security work, links to the APA are seldom hard to find. In this case, the APA has regularly lobbied for funding for DCHC while a former top APA research scientist was until very recently at CIFA and its successor DCHC investigating “deception detection,” like that reportedly occurring inside the “black jail.”

Over the years, the APA has devoted considerable lobbying resources to maintaining Congressional funding for CIFA. Thus, in a [report](#) on APA lobbying for fiscal year 2009, the APA ignored all the issues regarding corruption and illegal spying at CIFA as they advocated for protecting the agency’s funding:

Dr. Boehm-Davis concluded her testimony by noting another APA concern – the potential loss of invaluable behavioral science programs within DoD’s Counterintelligence Field Activity (CIFA) as it reorganizes and loses personnel strength. APA’s testimony urged Congress to provide ongoing funding in the next fiscal year for CIFA’s behavioral research programs on cyber security, insider threat, and other counter-terrorism and counter-intelligence operational

challenges.

After CIFA was folded into DCHC in the Defense Intelligence Agency, the APA lobbied Congress for money for "behavioral science" to support the DIA's activities, including the counterintelligence work now located in DCHC. Here is a section from the written APA testimony to the US Senate Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense regarding appropriations for the Fiscal Year 2010 budget:

APA... is concerned with maintaining invaluable human-centered research programs formerly within DoD's Counterintelligence Field Activity (CIFA) now that staff and programming have been transferred to the Defense Intelligence Agency. Within this DIA program, psychologists lead intramural and extramural research programs on counterintelligence issues ranging from models of "insider threat" to cybersecurity and detection of deception. These psychologists also consult with the three military services to translate findings from behavioral research directly into enhanced counterintelligence operations on the ground.

APA urges the Subcommittee to provide ongoing funding in FY10 for counterintelligence behavioral science research programs at DIA in light of their direct support for military intelligence operations.

There have been strong personal contacts between APA and CIFA/DCHC psychologists. The former Director of Behavioral Science for CIFA, Scott Shumate, was selected for the [APA's 2005 PENS](#)

[Psychological Ethics and National Security] taskforce, where he and the majority of other members from the military-intelligence establishment proclaimed it ethical, even essential, for psychologists to aid Bush-era interrogations at Guantánamo and elsewhere. Shumate had previously served with the CIA's Counterterrorism Center and was present for at least part of the 2002 torture of Abu Zubaydah; Shumate claims to have

[left in disgust](#)

, but the

New York Times

' Scott Shane reports skepticism about this claim. He quotes "[o]ne witness [who] said he believed that 'revisionism' in light of the torture controversy had prompted some participants to exaggerate their objections."

More recently, Susan Brandon – a former APA Senior Scientist who brought together psychologists and “operational personnel” from the intelligence community and later served as [Assistant Director for Social, Behavioral and Educational Sciences](#)

for the Bush White House –

[landed at CIFA](#)

and after the reorganization

[at DCHC](#)

. Brandon was one of the silent observers at the PENS taskforce

[described](#)

by dissident taskforce member Jean Maria Arrigo as exerting pressure on members to adopt a likely pre-approved policy in favor of participation in Guantánamo, CIA, and other interrogations. Throughout her career, including her time at CIFA/DCHC, Brandon worked on “deception detection” and other matters relevant to interrogations.

Thus, personal ties as well as a general desire to curry favor with the military-intelligence establishment likely influence APA support for CIFA and counterintelligence efforts within DIA – that is, for DCHC. While these agencies employ a number of psychologists – [CIFA reportedly employed 20 psychologists](#)

when Shumate was director of behavioral sciences there – the numbers of psychologists potentially affected by budget cuts alone cannot explain APA support over the years.

In pursuit of influence and a seat at the table with the national security apparatus, the APA has usually bought into unsubstantiated claims that these and other military-connected intelligence psychologists were opposed to torture and abuse, even as evidence mounted that many intelligence psychologists were participants in torture and other abuses that permeated much of US detention operations at Guantánamo, Bagram, and Iraq in recent years. That is, claims that psychologists were preventing abuses [were cover](#) for the fact that APA’s leadership [apparently never cared](#)

what it was that these psychologists might be doing.

Given this history of APA’s leadership turning a blind eye to reports of psychologist involvement in abuses, we shouldn’t hold our breath expecting the APA to change its position on DIA/DCHC funding now that the defense department admits that DCHC runs a detention facility using techniques like sleep deprivation that the APA itself has [proclaimed unethical](#) and amounting to either [torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment](#)

. After all, for the APA leadership in recent years, professional opportunities for psychology have always trumped professional ethics, at least in the national security sector.

Psychology as a profession is at a crossroads. As the connections discussed here illustrate, the profession has long-standing ties to the military-intelligence establishment that, outside of the awareness of many members, permeate much of its public policy making. While it is, perhaps, too much to expect that these relations will totally end, they must become more transparent and subject to public discussion and debate. A first step would be for APA leaders to express concerns and call for an independent investigation of the possibility that psychologists are studying or otherwise aiding abuses at the "black jail." That, alas, is a simple step that is extremely unlikely from the profession's current leadership.

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