

By S. Brian Willson

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I became aware of torture as a U.S. policy in 1969 when I was serving as a USAF combat security officer working near Can Tho City in Vietnam's Mekong Delta. I was informed about the CIA's Phong Dinh Province Interrogation Center (PIC) at the Can Tho Army airfield where supposedly "significant members" of the VCI (Viet Cong infrastructure) were taken for torture as part of the Phoenix Pacification Program. A huge French-built prison nearby was also apparently utilized for torture of suspects from the Delta region. Many were routinely murdered.

Naive, I was shocked! The Agency for International Development (AID) working with Southern Illinois University, for example, trained Vietnamese police and prison officials in the art of torture ("interrogations") under cover of "public safety." American officials believed they were teaching "better methods," often making suggestions during torture sessions conducted by Vietnamese police.

Instead of the recent euphemism "illegal combatants," the United State in Vietnam claimed prisoners were "criminal" and therefore exempt from Geneva Convention protections.

The use of torture as a function of terror, or its equivalent in sadistic behavior, has been historic de facto U.S. policy.

Our European ancestors' shameful, sadistic treatment of the indigenous inhabitants based on an ethos of arrogance and violence has become ingrained in our values. "Manifest destiny" has rationalized as a religion the elimination or assimilation of those perceived to be blocking American progress—at home or abroad—a belief that expansion of the nation, including subjugation of natives and others, is divinely ordained, that our "superior race" is obligated to

"civilize" those who stand in the way.

When examining my roots in New York and New England, I discovered that Indian captives were skinned alive and dragged through the streets of New Amsterdam (New York City) in the 1640s. Scalping enabled Indian bounty hunters to be paid.

Captains Underhill and Endicott, in the Massachusetts Bay Colony governed by John Winthrop, spent their time "burning and spoiling the country" of Indians in Rhode Island and Connecticut in 1636–37, while sparing the children and women as slaves.

My hometown of Geneva in the Finger Lakes region of New York State was once home to the Seneca Nation with its flourishing farms, orchards, and sturdy houses. In one two-week period in September 1779, General George Washington's orders "to lay waste...that the country...be...destroyed," instilling "terror" among the Indians, were dutifully carried out by General Sullivan, who promised that "the Indians shall see that there is malice enough in our hearts to destroy everything that contributes to their support." Sullivan's campaign has been described as a ruthless policy of scorched earth, bearing comparison with Sherman's march to the sea or the search-and-destroy missions of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam.

In northern California, where I now live, the same grueling history exists. Bret Harte wrote in 1860 that little children and old women were mercilessly stabbed and their skulls crushed by axes: "Old women...lay weltering in blood, their brains dashed out...while infants...with their faces cloven with hatchets and their bodies ghastly wounds" lay nearby.

In 1920, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) investigated the conduct of U.S. troops who had occupied Haiti since 1915. More than 3,000 Haitians were killed by U.S. Marines, many having been tortured.

When indigenous Nicaraguan resistance fought against the occupying U.S. forces in the late 1920s, the Marines launched counterinsurgency war. U.S. policymakers insisted on "stabilizing" the country to enforce loan repayments to U.S. banks. They defined the resistance forces as "bandits," an earlier equivalent to the "criminal prisoners" in Vietnam and "illegal combatants" in Iraq. Since the United States claimed not to be fighting a legitimate military force, any Nicaraguan perceived as interfering with the occupiers was commonly subjected to beatings,

tortures, and beheadings. When the Somoza dictatorship (installed by the United States) was overthrown in 1979, the Somoza torture centers were immediately destroyed.

In 1946, the U.S. Army institutionalized teaching torture techniques to Latin American militaries with the opening of its School of the Americas (SOA), which continues today as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHISC).

Torture has been a historical U.S. practice in police stations and prisons—and via countless vigilante crimes of sadistic torture and mutilation against black Americans.

The Wickersham Commission's 1931 Report on Lawlessness in Law Enforcement concluded that "the third degree is the employment of methods which inflict suffering, physical or mental, upon a person, in order to obtain from that person information about a crime... The third degree is widespread. The third degree is a secret and illegal practice."

Seventy years later, the 2002 Human Rights Watch World Report documented systematic use of torture by U.S. police: "thousands of allegations of police abuse, including excessive use of force, such as unjustified shootings, beatings, fatal chokings, and rough treatment."

My studies of brutality in Massachusetts prisons in 1981 concluded (in "Walpole State Prison, Massachusetts: An Exercise in Torture") by noting "a clear pattern and history of systematic torture including withholding water, heat, bedding, medical care, and showers; imposition of hazards such as flooding cells, placing foreign matter in food, igniting clothes and bedding, spraying with mace and tear gas; regular physical assaults and beatings; and forcing prisoners to lie face down, naked and handcuffed to one another...on freezing...outdoor ground while being kicked and beaten." This was two decades before the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo revelations.

Terry Kupers, a psychiatrist, has testified about human rights abuses in U.S. prisons. "The plight of prisoners in the USA is strikingly similar to the plight of the Iraqis who were abused by American GIs. Prisoners are maced, raped, beaten, starved, left naked in freezing cold cells and otherwise abused in too many American prisons, as substantiated by findings in many courts..."

It would behoove us to attempt to understand the underlying psychological defenses that seem to have afflicted us like a cultural mental illness since our origins.

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