

In the war to "defend civilization"

US liberal pundits debate the value of torture

David Walsh
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A widening discussion taking place in the US media, including the liberal press, of the proposed use of torture is an unmistakable sign of the social and moral rot of the American establishment and its authoritarian proclivities.

On November 5 the *New York Times* carried an article headlined "Torture Seeps Into Discussion by News Media." It reported on a number of recent instances in which the question of torturing "suspected terrorists" has appeared in the American media:

* An article by Jonathan Alter in the November 5 issue of *Newsweek* magazine, "Time To Think About Torture."

* A segment on Rupert Murdoch's Fox News Channel which anchorman Shepard Smith introduced by asking, "Should law enforcement be allowed to do anything, even terrible things, to make suspects spill the beans?"

* A comment on CNN's "Crossfire" program by right-winger Tucker Carlson, who suggested that under certain circumstances, torture "may be the lesser of two evils."

* An opinion piece in the October 23 *Wall Street Journal* in which historian Jay Winik reported on the "successful" torture of an alleged terrorist plotter in the Philippines in 1995.

* An article on *Slate*, the online magazine, by Dahlia Lithwick, entitled "Tortured Justice," which discusses various moral and legal issues in the torture debate.

To that list could be added the October 21 *Washington Post* article—"Silence of 4 Terror Probe Suspects Poses Dilemma"—already commented on by the WSWS [US considers use of torture in interrogation of terrorism suspects].

The immediate occasion for the discussion of torture has been the apparent refusal to cooperate by four individuals—Zacarias Moussaoui, Mohammed Jaweed Azmath, Ayub Ali Khan and Nabil Almarabh. All four are reported to be suspects in the September 11 attacks and are currently in a New York jail. None of them has been charged with any crimes relating to the terror attacks.

In his article in *Newsweek*, Jonathan Alter writes: "In this autumn of anger, even a liberal can find his thoughts turning to ... torture. OK, not cattle prods or rubber hoses, at least not here in the United States, but something to jumpstart the stalled investigation of the greatest crime in American history. Right now, four key hijacking suspects aren't talking at all. Couldn't we at least subject them to psychological torture, like tapes of dying rabbits or high-decibel rap? (The military has done that in Panama and elsewhere.) How about truth serum, administered with a

mandatory IV? Or deportation to Saudi Arabia, land of beheadings? (As the frustrated FBI has been threatening.) Some people still argue that we needn't rethink any of our old assumptions about law enforcement, but they're hopelessly 'Sept.10'—living in a country that no longer exists." Alter urges US law enforcement officials to follow the example of their Israeli counterparts, who are notorious for their savage treatment of Palestinian prisoners.

If it is remarkable to come across a column in a major US newsweekly advocating torture, a practice that the Enlightenment figure Cesare Beccaria called "worthy of a cannibal" 250 years ago, it is even more remarkable that the piece provoked no outcry in liberal circles.

According to the *Times* article: "Mr. Alter said he was surprised that his column did not provoke a significant flood of e-mail messages or letters. And perhaps even more surprising, he said, was that he had been approached by 'people who might be described as being on the left whispering, 'I agree with you.''"

The *Times* article notes that journalists have felt obliged to raise the subject of torture publicly because "torture is already a topic of discussion in bars, on commuter trains, and at dinner tables." This is a typical response of the US media, which routinely blames its own sins on the American people, claiming it is only responding to "public demand."

That the torture of prisoners is being talked about in the American media is a fact of great political significance. We are already witnessing on a wide scale such practices as arbitrary arrest and detention, mistreatment of prisoners, incommunicado detention and denial of due process, and a vast extension of police powers to wiretap and conduct surveillance. Now comes an attempt to legitimize the use of torture. It is reasonable to ask: what's next? Government sponsored death squads?

The US ruling elite, including its erstwhile liberal wing, is repudiating any attachment—even formal—to democratic rights, and sections of it are moving rapidly in the direction of fascism.

What lies behind this process?

The implication that US police and intelligence agencies have been heretofore run along humanitarian and democratic lines is reactionary nonsense. Whether it be the record of repression against political opponents or the "everyday" brutality meted out against the poor, particularly minorities, federal, state and local police in the US have a long record of abuse. Violence and repression in US jails and police stations are on the increase. In

May 2000 the United Nations Convention Against Torture in Geneva considered a 45-page report filed by Amnesty International citing police brutality and abuses and charging the US with violations of the convention that it ratified six years ago.

There is also the widely documented record of systematic torture (and murder) carried out by regimes around the world that are supported and armed by Washington. It is well known that the US military-operated School of the Americas (SOA), otherwise known as the “School of the Assassins,” has trained many Latin American torturers and death squad leaders.

The United Nations Truth Commission on El Salvador in 1993 revealed the participation of dozens of SOA graduates in atrocities and massacres. Those minimal restrictions on CIA practices presently in place are now being removed in the wake of September 11. The 1995 ban on hiring “human rights violators,” for example, has been lifted.

Socialists have long warned that the intensification of the social and political crisis in the US would mean the introduction domestically of the same brutal methods that the American elite has used for decades on peoples of the colonial and neo-colonial world. This is the process we are currently witnessing.

The sophistries advanced by the torture advocates—that, for example, desperate times require desperate measures—have been raised by every regime and ruling class moving toward totalitarian rule. The assumption of Alter and the other “torture advocates” is that the American state and its police agencies do not lie and are infallible, that those alleged to be guilty of crimes are indeed guilty of crimes, and that the FBI, CIA and police forces in general should be given an entirely free hand.

In the US, under the Constitution and the legal system as it presently stands, an individual under arrest is presumed innocent until proven otherwise. Guilt or innocence is determined through a trial, in which the defendant has legal counsel and a verdict is rendered by a jury of his or her peers, after hearing and weighing the evidence. The burden of proof is on the prosecution. In a criminal case, it must prove the defendant guilty “beyond a reasonable doubt.” All of these legal safeguards were elaborated over many decades by democratic thinkers and incorporated into the juridical tradition of the American Revolution in opposition to the procedures of the star chamber and other despotic practices. The Bill of Rights’ ban on “cruel and unusual punishment” was a direct response to the use of torture in interrogations under the European monarchies.

These are the democratic principles and traditions that are now being repudiated and attacked. What underlies the shift by large sections of the political establishment toward police-state methods of rule?

Social relations in the US have undergone far-reaching changes in the past several decades. American society is sharply polarized along class lines, and virtually all the benefits of the stock market and profit boom have accrued to a tiny handful at the top. As a result of this, and related ideological processes, the wealthy elite has grown increasingly alienated from working people, including sections of what was known as the middle class, from whom it is separated by a vast gulf. This inevitably gives rise to a hostility to the democratic rights of the mass of the population, which are seen

as obstacles to the accumulation of even more wealth and power.

It became obvious during the impeachment crisis that a sinister contempt for democratic principles permeated the American political establishment. The methods of Kenneth Starr—trampling on “due process,” threats and intimidation, harassing and hounding witnesses—were those of a would-be inquisitor. The next logical step is physical coercion.

This contempt for democratic rights finds a particularly sharp and grotesque form in the US media. For the most part, these well-paid, corrupt mouthpieces of the powers that be have moved far to the right. Various pundits, anchor people and columnists played a filthy role during the Clinton sex scandals, assisting the ultra-right in its attempt to overturn an elected government.

It is not simply the Afghan war that has set these people off. That conflict and the government-manipulated hysteria accompanying it may have triggered their sudden affinity for torture to deal with the alleged “enemies of America,” but other processes are also at work. The stock market boom has collapsed and the social situation bound up with it is unraveling. Alter and his ilk face the loss of income, the shrinking of portfolios.

The pundits who once considered themselves liberals welcome the introduction of police-state measures, in the final analysis, as a preparation for developments in the US. What are these people really afraid of? Osama bin Laden? No, that is largely for the purposes of duping the public. Along with the rest of the upper echelons of American society, what truly frightens them is the impact of economic slump on the broad layers of the population and the political instability, radicalization and social upheaval that must follow.

These economic and social processes have led sections of the ruling elite to embrace torture. Of course torture “American-style” is particularly hypocritical, requiring the insistence that the barbaric treatment will be inflicted only in the “defense of freedom.” The new watchword of its advocates, echoing the infamous phrase from the Vietnam War, is, “We have to destroy democracy in order to save it.”



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