

# New York Times whitewashes US torture

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“There are Ways to Make Them Talk.” The headline in the Sunday opinion section of the *New York Times*, echoing the language of the police precinct “third degree” or the torture chamber of a military dictatorship, was no doubt intended to titillate the newspaper’s readers.

However, the article by Eric Schmitt, the *Times*’ national security correspondent, asserts that the activities of the US military, CIA, FBI and other agencies are strictly in keeping with the Geneva Conventions, and that “torture is not an option.”

This reassurance to *Times* readers is offered in the face of persistent questions about how US interrogators are getting information from Abu Zubaida, an alleged aide to Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, and others taken prisoner in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Most recently, US officials credited information extracted through interrogations for their arrest of Jose Padilla, a US citizen whom they claim had talked to Al Qaeda operatives about the possibility of staging a radioactive “dirty bomb” attack.

“Since Sept. 11, there has been some public discussion in this country of whether torture would be justified if it produced information that could save American lives,” Schmitt notes. Given access to US military intelligence officers, who claim they do not engage in physical abuse, he recounts with undisguised enthusiasm how they “push psychological gamesmanship to the limits,” and use methods that “prey on a prisoner’s fears and desires, sexual stereotypes and cultural sensitivities.”

One method mentioned is threatening to turn prisoners over to Afghan warlords or secret police in some third country for torture and execution.

Schmitt quotes one senior intelligence officer as saying: “We’re looking for any kind of wedge to put a chink in their sense of security.”

All of this is perfectly acceptable, the *Times* affirms,

citing claims by these military officials that their methods “conform to military and international law” and that “under the Geneva Conventions, anything short of torture is permissible to get a hardened Qaeda operative to spill a few scraps of information.”

The *Times* article accepts the claims of military intelligence at face value. No critics of the US treatment of prisoners held at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base or other, secret, locations are interviewed. And the fact that the US military specialized in training dictatorial regimes throughout Latin America in the “art” of torture at its “School of the Americas,” now located at Fort Benning, Georgia is treated as ancient history.

The timing of the *Times* article is significant. The newspaper opened its pages to the army’s interrogators amid explosive revelations concerning US military involvement in heinous war crimes, including both torture and mass killings of defenseless prisoners.

Motions filed by lawyers for John Walker Lindh last week detailed the massacre of Afghan prisoners by US forces and their allies in the Northern Alliance at the Qala-i-Janghi prison fortress outside of Mazar-i-Sharif and Lindh’s own brutal treatment at the hands of US interrogators.

The latter involved severe abuse, both physical and psychological, including denial of adequate food and medical treatment—while Lindh was suffering from a gunshot wound—and the prisoner being bound and naked in an unheated shipping container in freezing temperatures, resulting in hypothermia and frostbite.

If this is what American military interrogators felt confident in meting out to someone they knew was an American citizen, what would restrain them from doing far worse to foreign nationals held in clandestine prisons outside the US?

Then there is the release of the documentary film, *Massacre in Mazar*, which provides extensive evidence

that US military forces participated directly in the torture of Afghan POWs, including throwing acid on them, and the killing of thousands of Taliban prisoners, whose bodies were dumped in the desert near the town of Mazar-i-Sharif, where Lindh was captured. The film's screening in Europe has prompted widespread demands for an international inquiry into US war crimes in Afghanistan.

Even if one were to accept the improbable claim that US interrogators are refraining from direct torture of prisoners, this hardly means that Washington's hands are clean, or that humane methods are the rule. There is ample evidence that the US military and the CIA are "contracting out" at least some of this dirty work to client regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere.

In an article published in March, the *Washington Post* reported that scores of suspects have been seized by US intelligence in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yugoslavia and other countries, and transported to third countries where they are subjected to torture at the hands of foreign police forces working in collaboration with the CIA. American agents are often on hand for the interrogations.

The *Post* article stated: "The suspects have been taken to countries, including Egypt and Jordan, whose intelligence services have close ties to the CIA and where they can be subjected to interrogation tactics—including torture and threats to families—that are illegal in the United States, the sources said. In some cases, US intelligence agents remain closely involved in the interrogation, the sources said."

Even if US intelligence officers' assertions, retailed uncritically by the *Times*, that they are eschewing physical abuse were truthful, the claim that their treatment of Afghan prisoners complies with the Geneva Conventions is patently false.

According to Article 17 of the Geneva Conventions: "No physical or mental torture, nor any other form of coercion, may be inflicted on prisoners of war to secure from them information of any kind whatever. Prisoners of war who refuse to answer may not be threatened, insulted, or exposed to any unpleasant or disadvantageous treatment of any kind."

It is well known that combatants are obliged to give no more than their "name, rank and serial number." Captors are barred by the conventions from pressing for more information, unless the captives have been found

by an independent tribunal to have engaged in criminal action.

No such tribunals have ever been convened for any of those captured by the US in Afghanistan or seized in other countries following September 11. Even if they had been, and the prisoners were found to be criminals, all of the specific methods described in the *Times* article would be banned under international law.

Is the *Times* correspondent so totally ignorant of the Geneva Conventions? Was he too lazy to check? Or is the "newspaper of record," like its army intelligence sources, deliberately lying in order to confuse public opinion and deflect concern over American war crimes? Whatever the case, the article is a textbook illustration of the increasingly open role of the *New York Times* as unabashed apologist and defender of US militarism abroad and attacks on democratic rights at home.

The unstated assumption of the article is that the US military and intelligence agencies never lie and are motivated only by the noblest humanitarian concerns. This is not very different from the approach taken in countries like Argentina, Chile, Uruguay and Brazil under military dictatorship, where the media faithfully reported without comment the regimes' statements that the "disappeared" were merely hiding, or that revelations about pervasive torture represented nothing but communist propaganda.

With their whitewash of the US military's use of torture, the editors of the *Times* have once again demonstrated that there exists nothing that can seriously be called a "liberal" opposition to the Bush administration within the American political and media establishment. The fight against war and the atrocities being carried out by the US military, as well as the defense of democratic rights, can be conducted only through the development of an independent political movement of the working class.



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