

# Forum in New York City on “the question of torture”

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A June 1 panel discussion, sponsored by the New York Public Library along with the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs and the *New York Review of Books*, testified to the growing disquiet in liberal and intellectual circles over the use of torture by the US military in Guantánamo, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

At the same time, the well-attended forum skirted the crucial political issues raised by the nonstop revelations that began with Abu Ghraib over one year ago. Although three of the four panelists discussed the role and responsibility of the Bush administration in the atrocities, none of them challenged the rationale of the administration’s “global war on terrorism.”

The speakers included Mark Danner, a writer for the *New York Review of Books* and the author of “Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror”; Elaine Scarry, a professor at Harvard University; Darius Rejali, an Iranian-born writer and the author of the forthcoming “Torture and Democracy”; and Mark Bowden, a contributor to the *Atlantic Monthly* and the author of “Black Hawk Down,” on which the movie of the same name was based. The meeting was chaired by Aryeh Neier, a founder of Human Rights Watch who is currently the president of the Open Society Institute.

Only Bowden attempted to justify torture—under exceptional circumstances, as he put it. He referred to “ticking bomb” cases in which the rapid extraction of information from a suspected terrorist would make the difference in heading off an attack that could cost the lives of thousands.

Several of the other speakers refuted this without difficulty. Even granting that the motive is to head off an act of terrorism, the likelihood that torture will achieve this objective is extremely remote. As Rejali

reported, some studies have estimated that between 3 and 6 percent of the information obtained under torture is accurate. He spelled out the meaning of this justification of torture as follows: “Twenty people are to be tortured and possibly killed for the possibility” of one piece of accurate information.

Bowden also made the somewhat ludicrous suggestion that interrogators be allowed to use torture under the most extraordinary circumstances, as long as they were willing to accept responsibility for violating policy in the interests of preventing a terrorist attack. Another panelist made the elementary point that torture does not fall under the rubric of civil disobedience, and that torturers have never yet come forward in this fashion to declare their moral right to abuse and kill suspects!

The real aim of torture, as a number of speakers pointed out, is not information, but fear and intimidation. As Danner explained, torture is part of a strategy of weakness on the part of an occupying power. As with the French in Algeria and in numerous other colonial wars and occupations, the practitioners of torture turn to it precisely because they don’t have the confidence of the population. They try to secure intelligence that is denied them through political channels, although their methods are almost always useless and even counterproductive. As Danner pointed out, the brutal beatings and worse administered to prisoners throughout Iraq have only produced thousands of new “insurgents” prepared to battle the US occupation.

Aryeh Neier, who has researched the history of torture, said that it has grown widely in scope in the course of the past 100 years, and now finds its practitioners in most corners of the globe. He stressed in particular the use of torture without visible

wounds—“stealth torture.” Although this was practiced in places as diverse as New York in the 1920s, Chicago in the 1970s and Tokyo in the 1980s, its current popularity with the authorities stems in large part from the fact that it is a technique that makes it difficult to establish it has taken place at all.

Rejali made the point that there is no sharp line between the role of the civilian police forces and the military when it comes to the use of these techniques. The techniques captured on film at Abu Ghraib, he explained, “may yet appear at a neighborhood near you in the next 20 years.”

“Torture, like incest, is the gift that keeps on giving,” said Rejali, meaning that the training of US military forces in these methods overseas can and will be brought to bear at home. Rejali also stressed the psychological damage done to those trained to carry out these atrocities.

Danner, who has reported from Iraq and written widely on the subject, stressed that there had been a significant change in US policy in recent years. “We are torturing now,” at this moment, he declared. Comparing the investigation of the subject of torture to a giant jigsaw puzzle, he said we now have perhaps one-third of the pieces.

Geneva Conventions protections were withheld from thousands on the orders of the Bush White House. Torture had been redefined by administration policymakers as “major organ failure or death.” It is quite possible to trace the path from working group documents in the Department of Defense to the practices carried out at Guantánamo, Danner explained, which then “migrated” to Abu Ghraib, as official investigations had themselves acknowledged.

Danner pointed out that the methods developed for the “global war against terrorism” (GWOT) had simply been applied without hesitation to Iraq, although every attempt to link Iraq to terrorism had been exposed as a lie.

Danner spoke for most of his colleagues when he declared on the subject of torture, with apparently sincere concern and even perplexity, “We’re doing it, and we know about it, but what we don’t have is any legal or moral way to confront it.”

The speakers could see no way in which this situation could be changed. Danner referred to the Watergate-type process of “revelation, investigation, adjudication

and punishment” for government wrongdoing. This process was no longer operating as it had in the past. “We are stuck at the revelation” phase, said Danner.

None of the speakers, however, attempted to explain the real purpose of the Bush administration’s “global war on terrorism,” which has given rise not only to systematic torture, but global military aggression.

Nor did any of them probe the political source of the atmosphere of despair expressed in the forum over halting these hideous crimes.

What was left unstated was that the US political establishment, and both of its political parties, Democrats and Republicans alike, have embraced a strategy of utilizing military means to advance US corporate interests against America’s rivals and the international working class.

Under these conditions, the use of torture is not an aberration, but an inevitable expression of this strategic orientation on the part of the predominant sections of the ruling elite. Recognizing this is the starting point for a genuine struggle to put an end to the atrocities that are being carried out in the name of the American people.



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