

# US psychologists' convention bans participation in torture

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On Friday, the American Psychological Association overwhelmingly adopted a resolution banning participation by psychologists in national security interrogations, in the face of accusations that the proposed ban on torture was “anti-government” and “anti-military.”

The resolution states that “psychologists shall not conduct, supervise, be in the presence of, or otherwise assist any national security interrogations for any military or intelligence entities, including private contractors working on their behalf, nor advise on conditions of confinement insofar as these might facilitate such an interrogation.”

The resolution was adopted at a convention in Toronto by a vote of 156 council members to one, with seven abstentions and one recusal. Following the successful vote, participants and a crowd of observers rose for a defiant standing ovation. Some wore T-shirts that read, “First, do no harm,” referring to the fundamental concept in medical ethics.

The American Psychological Association is a scientific and professional organization embracing 122,500 professionals. Full membership in the organization requires a doctoral degree.

According to an APA press release, “The new policy does allow for psychologist involvement in general policy consultation regarding humane interrogations. The prohibition does not apply to domestic law enforcement interrogations or domestic detention settings where detainees are under the protection of the U.S. Constitution.”

The vote follows the release of a 542-page independent report last month implicating the APA in the CIA torture program, which was prepared by a team of lawyers led by former federal prosecutor David Hoffman. The Hoffman report, commissioned by the

APA, exposed a conspiracy at the top levels of the APA, in collusion with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Department of Defense (DOD), to facilitate the involvement of psychologists in the CIA torture program and later to shield the perpetrators from accountability.

The CIA torture program was the subject of a devastating Senate Intelligence Committee report in December of last year, which shamefully continues to be ignored by the establishment media in the US. The Senate report painted a picture of systematic and shocking brutality, infamously including “rectal feeding” and other practices, with the active oversight of the highest levels of the state. The Senate report found that numerous medical professionals had been accomplices or direct participants in torture, including doctors, nurses and psychologists.

In the period leading up to the APA’s annual conference last week, dissident psychologists opposed to torture were targeted for browbeating and intimidation. Tony Williams, president of the APA’s Society for Military Psychology, characterized the ban on torture that was passed Friday as a “politically motivated, anti-government and anti-military stance.” He went on to criticize the Hoffman report as serving “an effort to advance an unspoken political agenda.”

In the face of such efforts, the nearly unanimous vote is certainly a welcome repudiation of the criminal torture practices of the American government that were implemented as part of the “war on terror.” The vote vindicates the efforts of those dissident psychologists who have campaigned for years against torture.

At the same time, it is certainly an indication of the present crisis of American society that a vote was even necessary at all. Torture has been clearly illegal for decades, under both international and domestic law.

The involvement of medical professionals in torture is unambiguously prohibited by the Nuremberg Code, which resulted from the trials of Nazi doctors in the aftermath of the Second World War. (See The American Psychological Association, torture and the Nuremberg doctors' trial.) Under the Nuremberg Code, medical professionals require the voluntary informed consent of their patients, and they are required to minimize harm.

The vote Friday paves the way for ethical complaints to be initiated against the psychologists involved in the CIA torture program, the loss of their licenses, and even prosecutions.

While those psychologists who participated in torture should certainly be held accountable, holding them accountable raises the question of all other civilian, military and intelligence officials and personnel who participated in torture. What about the top officials in the Bush and Obama administrations that orchestrated the program, lied about it, and tried to conceal it?

To date, the Obama administration has consistently refused to hold anyone involved in the criminal torture program accountable, invoking the slogan "looking forward, not backward." The APA vote on Friday is a reminder that war criminals and torturers remain at large, who have yet to be brought to justice.

Retired Army Colonel Larry James cast the one dissenting vote on Friday. James served as Guantanamo's chief psychologist in 2003 and as the director of the Abu Grahیب "behavioral science unit" in 2004.

At both Guantanamo Bay and Abu Grahیب, according to the Center for Torture Accountability, "James headed teams of 'mental health' professionals charged with destroying the mental health of detainees, on the theory that psychologically broken men would provide interrogators with more information."

James claims that his role was to ensure that the detainees were treated ethically, but the Center indicates that his real function was "to maximize their psychological pain."

"On his watch, prisoners were threatened with rape and murder, sexually humiliated, left naked in cold cells, chained into uncomfortable 'stress positions' for hours on end, and deprived of sleep and human contact, among other psychological regimens," the Center notes.

In 2008, James became dean of the School of Professional Psychology at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. In 2009, he served as president of the American Board of Health Psychology. From 2009 to 2010, he served as president elect of the APA's Division of Military Psychology.

In 2010, James announced that he had been appointed to a task force headed by Michelle Obama called, "Enhancing the Psychological Well-Being of The Military Family." In a press release, James emphatically agreed with the Obama administration's policy of "turning the page" on torture—that is, the policy of zero accountability for torturers and their accomplices.



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