

The cover-up of torture in America's prisons

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Last week, the *New York Times* reported allegations that prison guards systematically tortured inmates at Clinton Correctional Facility in upstate New York following the high profile escape of two inmates.

More than 60 prisoners filed complaints claiming that they suffered abuse, including beatings, stranglings and death threats. Most significant, however, was the apparent personal involvement of New York Governor Andrew M. Cuomo, a Democrat, in these brutal actions.

Just hours before state prison guards without name tags descended upon the cell block to torture the escapees' fellow prisoners, Cuomo had visited the prison, asking one inmate, in the presence of the media, why he did not hear the escapees cutting through their prison bars. "[It] must have kept you awake with all that cutting, huh?" before giving him "his best tough-guy stare," according to the prisoner, and walking off.

Cuomo later told ABC News, "I chatted with a couple of the inmates myself and I said, you must be a very heavy sleeper. They were heard. They had to be heard."

Within a matter of hours, the inmate Cuomo spoke to was asked by an unnamed guard, "You know what waterboarding is?" before having his head thrust into a plastic bag hanging from a pipe and being beaten for 20 minutes. Another inmate reported being hung by a plastic bag used as a noose until he passed out.

Despite these shocking revelations, not a single national news outlet has commented on the incident since Wednesday or even bothered to follow up on the story. This includes the supposed "newspaper of record," the *New York Times*, whose breaking of the story amounted to a controlled, semi-official release of information.

The abuse of the prisoners is hardly an aberration. Indeed, the Clinton Dannemora prison is notorious for its treatment of those behind bars. According to one

local report, in the 1990s "state officials settled a rash of nearly a dozen cases involving alleged brutality by guards against inmates." Indeed, Cuomo himself defended the prison's reputation for abuse in an interview last month, declaring that it was not the time "to second-guess the basic operation" at the prison: "the basic operation has been fantastic because no one has ever escaped before."

This thinly veiled defense of abuse and torture from the governor of one of the largest states in the country has passed without comment from a single political figure, including the various candidates for president in both parties. There have been no calls for an investigation into Cuomo's role or into the claims of the prisoners.

The cover-up expresses the fact that, for the ruling class, such practices are considered routine and necessary.

The torture in New York State follows revelations this year that police in Chicago regularly "disappeared" prisoners into a "black site" known as Homan Square, where prisoners were shackled into "stress positions" and beaten into confessing to crimes or informing on others. From New York's Rikers Island, to Florida's state prisons, to the overcrowded penitentiaries of Southern California, beatings by prison guards take place every day.

Meanwhile, the medieval dungeon has reappeared in America, under the Orwellian name of "solitary confinement." Every day, more than 80,000 people languish in isolation in America's prisons, including 17,000 children in juvenile detention centers, according to a report appearing over the weekend in the *Times*. It is not uncommon for prisoners to spend years and even decades in near-total isolation.

Solitary confinement is classified as a form of torture by the United Nations, with the American Civil Liberties Union reporting that 95 percent of those

subjected to the barbaric practice said that it led to psychiatric symptoms, including hallucinations and panic attacks.

Yet in America, children, some as young as 14, are routinely subjected to this torture. Isolation is often enforced on prisoners who have never been convicted of a crime, as in the case of Kalief Browder, a child prisoner who killed himself this year after being released.

Karl Marx wrote in 1859 that the “legal and political superstructure” arises out of the economic structure of society. The increasing prevalence of torture, arbitrary imprisonment, the denial of habeas corpus, and rampant police brutality in the legal field expresses the brutal and exploitative character of social relations in the United States. The richest 400 families in the US have a net worth of \$2.29 trillion, while close to half of the population has effectively zero or negative wealth.

The United States, moreover, has been continuously at war for at least two and a half decades. Torture has become an instrument of foreign policy abroad, in CIA detention centers and at Guantanamo Bay, and those who implemented this illegal policy have gone unpunished.

Is it any surprise then that this same president, Obama, who boasts about his role in assassinating people, including US citizens, abroad, presides over a police force armed with armored personnel carriers and machine guns? Or that the gulags run by the military and intelligence apparatus around the world have their parallel in a giant prison complex that contains more individuals than any other country in the world?

Torture, outlawed explicitly in the Constitution, has reemerged as the organic expression of social relations in the United States, in which a criminal financial oligarchy derives its enormous wealth by robbing and swindling the great mass of society, while the perpetual wars the country is engaged in are increasingly seeping into domestic legal policy.



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