

Psychologist responsible for devising torture methods testifies at Guantanamo Bay hearing

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James Mitchell, an Air Force veteran and psychologist who was a leading architect of the torture methods pervasive at US “black sites” around the world, testified to his role and to the record of the CIA in their infamous torture program at a pretrial hearing Tuesday at Guantanamo Bay for Khalid Shaikh Mohammed (KSM) and others accused of involvement in the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, D.C.

In addition to devising the “enhanced interrogation techniques” that became a staple of US intelligence operations throughout the so-called War on Terror, Mitchell personally carried out a number of waterboarding sessions against prisoners such as Abu Zubaydah, the first and most prominent victim of such torture. It was later determined that Zubaydah had no prior knowledge of the 9/11 attacks and was not a member of Al Qaeda. Despite being held for nearly two decades, he has not been accused of a crime.

Regarding his own role, Mitchell’s testimony bounced between aggressive patriotism and self-pity. He at once proudly proclaimed “I’d get up today and do it again... I thought my moral duty to protect American lives outweighed the feelings of discomfort of terrorists who voluntarily took up arms against us. To me it just seemed like it would be dereliction of my moral responsibilities... I actually did it for the victims and families [of 9/11]. Not you.” And cruelly lamented “Some of the folks who were watching were tearful... I was tearful. I cry at dog food commercials, and it was particularly hard for me to do.” He rejected the use of the term “torture” throughout his testimony.

According to Mitchell’s testimony, after several weeks of waterboarding Zubaydah in August of 2002, Mitchell and other CIA contract psychologists wanted to stop the program, citing Zubaydah’s cooperation.

The CIA responded in a cable, “Please continue with the aggressive interrogation strategy for the next 2–3 weeks.” After asking to stop several times, they eventually persuaded a delegation from Langley to come visit the black site.

“I felt sorry for him [Zubaydah]... I thought it was unnecessary. He had agreed to work for us.” In response to these appeals, the directors of the program at the CIA called the psychologists “pussies.” The torture program continued, and Mitchell and his colleagues continued their sadistic work in it.

On Monday, Mitchell recounted the torture of KSM, confessing that in March 2003 he threatened to kill the detainee’s son. He quickly added that he was concerned about the legal ramifications of making such a threat and had only done so after consulting with CIA lawyers. He was advised only to make the threat conditional: “I will cut your son’s throat... if there was another catastrophic attack in the United States, if [KSM withheld] information that could have stopped it... or if another American child was killed.”

This was no idle threat, as two of KSM’s sons, Yusuf and Abed, aged 9 and 7 respectively had been captured by Pakistani security forces in a joint raid with the US the previous September. KSM was not informed of their wellbeing until 2006. According to Zeke Johnson, a program director for Amnesty International, “Threatening to kill a detainee’s child would violate the Convention Against Torture and be illegal.”

In 2017, a case against Mitchell and John Bruce Jessen, another ex-Air Force CIA psychologist involved in the torture program, was settled out of court. The details of the settlement are not public, and it is believed that a cash payout was given to some of the victims in order to keep the program covered up. All that came of it was a joint statement in which the

psychologists said they advised the CIA about abuses, but that nothing otherwise had changed.

Mitchell said at the time that it was “regrettable that one guy died and those other guys were treated badly. We had nothing to do with it. We’re not responsible for it. They say we are, but in my view they’re wrong.”

The CIA has paid their torturers handsomely. Both Mitchell and Jessen received up to \$1,800 a day and later formed a company that was paid a total of at least \$81 million from its founding.

While these psychologists face no charges and receive massive payouts, the figures who oversaw the black sites where torture took place and subsequently destroyed evidence, such as Gina Haspel, not only walk free, but have been promoted. Haspel became the CIA director in 2018, after former director Mike Pompeo became US secretary of state.

Haspel was the head of a CIA black site in Thailand which was used to torture prisoners using the very methods devised by Mitchell, and was directly responsible for covering up evidence of those crimes, including by deleting video footage. In his testimony, Mitchell claimed that the first person he waterboarded was Zubaydah, and that he did so in 2002 at the Thailand black site.

As key Democrats backed Haspel’s confirmation as CIA director, Trump himself proclaimed in his 2016 presidential campaign that “I would bring back waterboarding, and I’d bring back a hell of a lot worse than waterboarding!”

While dominant sections of the military have come out against waterboarding, questioning its efficacy and fearing its potential to stir up mass opposition to the medieval methods of US imperialism, such concerns are merely tactical.

Although the focus of US imperialism’s strategy has formally shifted away from the “war on terror” and towards great power conflict, the legitimization of torture continues to be a significant goal of the ruling class. No section of the ruling class fundamentally objects to these barbaric methods, with President Barack Obama infamously covering up the torture program with his calls to “look forward, not backwards.” Both the Democrats and Republicans are agreed in pursuing an agenda of war and dictatorship and see the use of extraordinary violence and draconian repression as necessary to that end.

The author also recommends:

America’s torturers and their co-conspirators must be prosecuted

[9 December 2019]

Washington buries the CIA torture report

[8 January 2015]



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