

April 27, 2009

Torture Versus War

By SCOTT SHANE

WASHINGTON

WHEN the Central Intelligence Agency obliterates a dozen suspected terrorists, along with assorted family members, with a missile from a drone, the news rarely stirs a strong reaction far beyond Pakistan.

Yet the waterboarding of three operatives from Al Qaeda — one of them the admitted murderer of 3,000 people as organizer of the 9/11 attacks — has stirred years of recriminations, calls for prosecution and national soul-searching.

What is it about the terrible intimacy of torture that so disturbs and captivates the public? Why has torture long been singled out for special condemnation in the law of war, when war brings death and suffering on a scale that dwarfs the torture chamber?

Those questions arose with new force last week, as President Obama settled a battle between the C.I.A. and the Justice Department by siding with the latter and releasing four excruciatingly detailed legal opinions from the department, written in 2002 and 2005, justifying brutal interrogations. But he also repeated his opposition to a lengthy inquiry into the program, saying that “nothing will be gained by spending our time and energy laying blame for the past.” The C.I.A. officers who were acting on the Justice Department’s legal advice would not be prosecuted, he said.

In their meticulousness, and even their elaborate rules intended to prevent death or permanent injury, the memos became the object of fascination and dread. Who knew that along with waterboarding and wall-slammings, cold cells and sleep deprivation up to 180 hours, the approved invasions of the prisoner’s space included the “facial hold” — essentially what grandma does to a visiting grandchild who misbehaves — with hands holding the sides of the head as questions are asked.

“The fingertips are kept well away from the individual’s eyes,” the memo helpfully adds.

In releasing the memos, Mr. Obama again denounced harsh interrogation as unworthy of the United States and said the country “must reject the false choice between our security and our ideals.” He and other critics have often stated their objections: torture or near-torture can produce false information; it handicaps the United States in a battle of ideas; it can be a recruiting tool for Al Qaeda.

At the same time, public opinion has shown less horror over the strikes carried out by Hellfire missiles fired from Predator drones in the weeks since those deadly missions have been embraced and even expanded to new territories under Mr. Obama. This is presumably because the president's implicit view of the relative moral status of these two ways of responding to terrorists is widely shared.

One former C.I.A. official, who in the current atmosphere insisted on not being named, and whose duties at times included briefing the Congressional intelligence committees, said he was bemused by reactions of lawmakers on those panels. Members would be thrilled and cheered by the Predator strike videos he would bring along — and then grill and berate him over the agency's interrogation methods.

The hands-on nature of torture lends it particular power, said Andrea Northwood, a psychologist who has treated hundreds of people at the Center for Victims of Torture in Minneapolis. Even when the victim is a figure like Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, the 9/11 plotter, torture carries a vicarious chill.

"It's a profoundly affecting tool in evoking primal terror," Dr. Northwood said. "We can easily put ourselves in that situation, and that terrifies us."

Darius Rejali, the author of "Torture and Democracy," a massive 2007 history of the myriad ways humans have tormented other humans, said he had often been struck by the disproportionate emotional response to death and torture.

"What's fascinating to people about torture is it gives one person absolute power over another, which is both alluring and corrupting," said Dr. Rejali, a professor of political science at Reed College. Torture, like slavery, corrupts both individuals and societies, he said.

But what about the absolute power of the C.I.A. "pilot," thousands of miles from his unmanned aerial vehicle, who pushes a button and unleashes distant death?

As a different former C.I.A. official said, "Imagine a Hellfire missile coming through your roof. You die in a burning pile of rubble. Isn't that torture?"

Not quite, Dr. Rejali responds. "The people you're killing with a Predator," he said, "are not detained and helpless."

Ever since word leaked that the C.I.A. subjected Mr. Mohammed and two other prisoners in 2002 and early 2003 to waterboarding, the near-drowning method with a pedigree stretching back to the Spanish Inquisition and beyond, that fact has resonated powerfully in American politics.

In 2007, long after the events, Michael B. Mukasey's nomination as attorney general almost faltered when he refused to call waterboarding torture. Mr. Obama's choice to head the Justice Department, Eric H. Holder Jr., swiftly and strongly declared what to many people was the obvious, as did Leon E. Panetta, the new C.I.A. director.

What the episodes showed is what Senator John McCain, perhaps this country's most famous torture victim, has often said about why the United States must not use it: "It's not about the terrorists," he says. "It's about us."

It may be that the revelations of the interrogation memos, ending the secrecy about what was done, will quiet the furor over torture. But it seems unlikely. So far every new disclosure about the intimate brutality carried out in the name of national security has only provoked more questions.

Published in the Week in Review on April 19, 2009.

- a. Why do you think people have more intense reactions to hearing about torture than they do to hearing about bombings or other acts of war?
- b. What do you think President Obama means when he says that America "must reject the false choice between our security and our ideals"? Do you think this is a fair way to frame the issue? Why or why not?
- c. Do you agree with Dr. Rejali that "torture, like slavery, corrupts both individuals and societies"? If so, why? If not, why not?
- d. What explanation does Darius Rejali give for why people are more appalled by torture than by the Predator attack? Do you agree with his explanation? Why or why not?