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Torturing the Language of Torture **by Sheldon Richman**

Is waterboarding, known during the Spanish Inquisition as *tortura del agua*, really torture or not? The question seems to answer itself, but the Bush administration says No. Its critics disagree, noting that the “interrogation technique,” which makes a subject physically and mentally react as though he is drowning, has long been regarded as torture by international agreements and outlawed in the United States.

The *Washington Post* reports that the Army investigated U.S. forces for using the method on a North Vietnamese in 1968. Moreover, “Twenty-one years earlier, in 1947, the United States charged a Japanese officer, Yukio Asano, with war crimes for carrying out another form of waterboarding on a U.S. civilian,” the *Post* reported. Asano was sentenced to 15 years’ hard labor.

Despite all this, the Bush administration and its knee-jerk supporters incoherently maintain (1) that waterboarding is not torture, and (2) that it’s effective at getting hardened terrorists to spill their guts with useful information that enables the U.S. government to save innocent lives.

Which is it?

If you want a good laugh, listen to right-wing talk radio on this subject. To hear the conservative show-biz people talk, you’d think waterboarding was something you can do at the local health spa. But then they contradict themselves by saying that the technique is used in training CIA operatives so that they can withstand interrogation if captured. I don’t see how both positions can be true.

The *Post* noted that at one time U.S. special forces used waterboarding during training. But it “proved so successful in breaking their will, says one former Navy captain familiar with the practice, ‘they stopped using it because it hurt morale.’” That sounds like torture.

The word games played by the Bush administration in this matter are beyond Clintonesque. These guys, including the new attorney general, Michael Mukasey, take evasion to new heights. What else is there to say about public (mis)leaders and (self-)servants who declare,

“We don’t torture,” and then refuse to say whether waterboarding is used? Mukasey can’t even make up his mind whether waterboarding *is* torture.

That the CIA destroyed tapes showing the interrogation, and perhaps waterboarding, of al-Qaeda suspects only reinforces the image of the Bush administration as lawless and ruthless. Despite what Bush apologists say, it is no defense to point out that Democratic members of Congress were notified about the interrogation techniques. The relevant points are that the American people were not told and that no one who favors strictly limiting the power of government could countenance such a policy.

This last matter is totally lost on the right wing. Despite lip service to limiting government, the most prominent right-wing spokesmen cheer the administration’s policy of torture and secrecy. Invoking a bizarre theory of executive power, they believe the president possesses expansive powers as head of the executive branch of government and as commander in chief of the armed forces. It takes a highly selective reading of the Constitution to get to that position, but neoconservative legal theorists and their talk-show followers have no problem with that. Suddenly the strict constructionists find implied presidential powers everywhere. We’ll see whether they sing the same tune should Hillary Clinton become president.

Is torture necessary to protect the American people? Even if it were, there’s a far better method available: ending the imperial foreign policy that has provoked people into plotting against us.

Critics of the Bush administration emphasize that torture is notoriously ineffective at yielding good information from suspects. But that is a weak argument. Surely there are cases in which torture worked. Former CIA interrogator John Kiriakou, who regards waterboarding as torture, says the technique quickly got al-Qaeda’s Abu Zubayda to give up valuable information. You can never say it won’t work on the next suspect.

But that’s not what this controversy hinges on. The crux is whether government can be trusted with such a cruel power. Right-wing state worshipers insist that the U.S. government under George W. Bush can be trusted with that power.

The very thought of trusting this government with that power is enough to make one shudder.

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