

## The Truth About Torture

☐ Mark Bowden, the author of "The Dark Art of Interrogation," on why the practice of coercion is a necessary evil

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The thing that is in Room 101 is the worst thing in the world," George Orwell wrote in *1984*. It "varies from individual to individual. It may be burial alive, or death by fire, or by drowning, or by impalement, or fifty other deaths. There are cases where it is some quite trivial thing, not even fatal." In Orwell's dystopia, Room 101 represented torture's destruction of the human soul. And to the extent that the public thinks about torture today, it thinks of physical pain and psychological anguish like that described in *1984*.

But in "The Dark Art of Interrogation" (October *Atlantic*), Mark Bowden argues that the public's understanding of torture is too simplistic. While the "civilized world" has condemned all forms of torture, Bowden explains that there are different kinds of torture—and different kinds of people who are subjected to it. There is a vast difference, Bowden writes, between using cattle prods to wring false confessions out of Chinese prisoners and using sleep deprivation and rough handling to get life-saving information from captured terrorists. In fact, the word "torture" does not even apply when interrogators employ only moderate physical and psychological pressure, Bowden argues; he and others prefer the term "coercion."

"The Dark Art of Interrogation" offers a comprehensive survey of the world of torture and coercion. Bowden interviewed professional interrogators, such as Michael Koubi, a former interrogator for Israel's General Security Services, and Jerry Giorgio, the New York Police Department's "legendary third-degree man," along with prisoners, soldiers, and human-rights activists. Bowden also describes the forms of coercion the United States is likely employing against captured terrorists: cramped quarters, isolation, sleep deprivation, infrequent meals, and rough handling. But most of all, the article presents Bowden's struggle to understand torture—when it might be appropriate and the implications of employing it. While Bowden concedes that opposition to all forms of torture is an admirable belief, he argues that "few moral imperatives make such sense on a large scale but break down so dramatically in the particular." Is it morally right to protect a terrorist from torture if "we pay for his silence in blood"? How can the United States extract information from captured terrorists while maintaining individual rights? How can the nation permit torture in certain cases without letting it become a "shortcut for a lazy or incompetent investigator"?

Some will find the answers Bowden offers wholly sensible; others will find them morally repugnant. Regardless of whether one agrees with its conclusions, however, "The Dark of Interrogation" is an examination into an important aspect of the war on terror that many Americans—and certainly the nation's leaders—would prefer to avoid discussing.

Mark Bowden is the author of six books, including [Black Hawk Down](#) (1999) and [Killing Pablo](#), which won the Overseas Press Club's Cornelius Ryan Award as the best book of 2001. He is also a national correspondent for *The Atlantic*.

We spoke recently by telephone.

—Alexander Barnes Dryer

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**The people you interviewed—for example, Michael Koubi, the former chief interrogator for Israel's security service—practice what you call a rare art. These people seem to inhabit a small and secretive world. How did you, as a reporter, break into this world?**

I just became curious about it. I'd read about all these top terrorist leaders being captured, and I kept reading accounts that they were providing useful information. It surprised me that someone who was suicidally motivated and fanatical would be cooperating with the people who had arrested him within weeks of being picked up.

So I started asking around to find out if that was, in fact, likely. I found people on both sides—some who were very skeptical of printed reports, saying that they didn't really believe that American interrogators were getting much from the terrorists, and some who were confident that the techniques that were employed worked. So I got really curious to discover what those techniques might be. It was not an easy thing to do, because no one involved in the current practices would talk to me. The White House refused to be interviewed on the subject, and the Justice Department, the FBI, the CIA, and the military—all the various government agencies that have a role—refused to comment. So my assistant and I did a fairly exhaustive amount of research, and we were able to unearth a great deal of material that has been freed up from the government through the Freedom of Information Act. We also found books and articles detailing what past practices have been. It's fairly clear that starting in the mid-1970s, when there was a general crackdown on the CIA, the United States stopped using coercive methods of interrogation for a long period of time—although I believe they started up again after September 11. So it seemed to me that the material that was put together for the CIA, the Justice Department, and the Army back in the fifties and sixties would still be relevant—with such a long hiatus, it was doubtful that those methods had been substantially changed or altered in the interim.

So it was research and then it was finding people who have hands-on experience with interrogation, both as victims and practitioners. And to do that, I looked at people in the private, civilian sector, which led me to Jerry Giorgio, the New York City interrogator, and, of course, to Israel where the practice of coercive methods and interrogation has been fairly open until recent years. I thought it would make sense to try to find someone there who had hands-on experience, and I was lucky enough to find Michael Koubi, who was surprisingly willing to talk about his methods and what he had done. I find that Israelis tend to be a whole lot more candid and frank about difficult subjects than people in the United States.

**It's interesting that information from the fifties and sixties was still relevant. Your article indicated that the CIA of forty years ago was much more interested in developing new interrogation techniques than the CIA of today. Has September 11 sparked a new interest in finding better techniques?**

I think it has. I think September 11 restored to respectability the practice of coercive methods of

interrogation. My suspicion is that, as with any profession (and this is a bizarre, dark one), the people involved are learning from the experience of people in other countries, are looking back at the things that were catalogued in the past, and are studying their own experience—what works and what doesn't work. I think that some years down the road, this period will produce some of its own theory and practice.

**When you write about specific techniques, it's apparent that the most effective interrogation is very theatrical. But are there efforts to make it more of a science? Our understanding of how the human brain works has grown exponentially in the last several decades. Do you see any of that new knowledge being brought into the field of interrogation?**

I think—and I probably reflect the thinking of the people involved in it—that interrogation is far more an art than a science. It essentially boils down to the skill of an individual interrogator reading the person that he's working on and pushing the buttons that he thinks will produce results. And I think we'll find that ultimately it will remain more of an art than a science. Some people will be better at it than others, and I don't believe that you'll ever be able to turn it into a science until you're able to turn human behavior into a science—which we haven't been terribly good at. The areas in which we have made extraordinary strides in psychology today are in brain chemistry and the use of drugs, and to my knowledge there exists no such thing as a "truth serum" or a chemical that will relax a person's inhibitions. It seems that even though we do know a lot more about the brain, people are still very much in control of it.

**It's surprising that with all the work in psychopharmacology scientists aren't pursuing a "truth serum" more vigorously—is that because such work might be seen as a violation of treaties banning torture?**

To my knowledge, no one is working on it. And any work that might have been done in a purely academic way—on the effect of drugs on the brain and on human behavior—has not been studied or collected. I think that the United States had adopted the posture, in accordance with the universal abhorrence of torture, of treating people within the strict boundaries of our international agreements. What I've tried to explain in my article is that the United States is now trying to walk a delicate line between adhering to its international agreements and doing what it feels is justified and necessary to get information. And I found that to be a particularly fascinating part of this piece.

**I thought that was certainly the most nuanced and complex aspect. At one point you say that the United States "is avoiding the brand 'torturer' only by sleight of word." The Bush Administration certainly does not share European governments' appetite for international agreements. But will the growing universal justice movement, exemplified in institutions like the International Criminal Court, make it more difficult for the United States to use coercion?**

I don't think we're going to see the United States entering into any international agreements on this subject that would further clarify what is and is not torture. Given the general tenor of the Bush-Cheney Administration, I think that they would have been very unlikely to enter into those agreements in the first place, and they now look upon them with a somewhat horrified eye. So while they're unwilling to flaunt the agreements that the United States has already made, they are also unwilling to be completely bound by them.

**But with Europe moving in such a different direction on human rights, will the United States's position be more difficult to maintain?**

Sure. To the extent that the United States is perceived as a rogue nation, as a country that doesn't act in concert with other nations and doesn't really honor international efforts, these other countries are going to continue holding our feet to the fire, so to speak. These are difficult political decisions that any Administration would face. It just so happens that we have an Administration that doesn't seem to have any qualms about pissing off Europe. In a nutshell, I think an Administration under Gore would probably have found this whole thing to be more difficult. Because I think Gore and the Democrats—certainly the Clinton crowd—were far more respectful of both the tone and the substance of our relationships overseas.

**You conclude that "coercion should be banned but also quietly practiced," because legalized coercion, even when closely regulated, is the ultimate "slippery slope." Yet if coercion is officially banned, how will Americans come to a consensus about what kind of coercion is and isn't appropriate? It's hard to have a debate about something that officially doesn't happen.**

Well, I think that part of the strategy here of the current Administration is not to have a debate on it—not to talk about it. And that's actually a very smart way of handling this. Because this is a realm where a certain amount of two-facedness is called for, unfortunately. I believe that it would be wrong to license all coercion, but by the same token, I believe that it would be wrong not to practice it in certain cases. So I agree with Jessica Montell, the very articulate activist I interviewed in Israel, in saying that if the law bans torture, at least those people who are practicing coercion have to face the possibility of being held accountable for their actions. The law acts as a constraint on the use of coercion. But it's also unrealistic under the present circumstances to conclude that anybody is ever going to be brought to justice for violating the spirit of international agreements against torture.

I set out to do this story without any clear idea of how I felt, other than a sense that in certain circumstances it seemed that torture was the appropriate thing to do. But I hadn't made a serious study of the matter, and I really didn't know how I would feel about it when I got to the end of writing this article. So what you see in the course of this article is me wrestling with the implications of torture and the current situation and what I really think about it. Like any sensitive person, I don't relish the idea of inflicting pain on someone, or making someone miserable. But by the same token, if you can save lives—if people are plotting mass murder and you have a chance of preventing it—it's hard to argue against whatever methods work. And so I wanted to know how I felt about it, what exactly I was talking about, what was being practiced by people today and whether it was legal or not. Those are the questions that I've tried to answer. And I know the Administration, judging by its reluctance to cooperate with me in any way, was not particularly eager for me or anyone else to do this.

**I think the conflict you're emphasizing is the one you express in the article—the conflict between the "civilian sensibility," which emphasizes maintaining the rule of law, and the "warrior sensibility," which emphasizes completing the mission. Will the American public be able to grasp the distinction between those two sensibilities? And if Americans do grasp it, is it something with which they will be comfortable?**

I think the American public will support whatever appears to be the most popular thing at any given moment. I think the harder question is, Will American intellectuals, jurists, and lawyers arrive at some kind of consensus on what's appropriate, moral, and legal? We haven't had that debate in this country. They have had the debate in Israel, but we haven't had it here. And I suspect that we won't have it here.

The public is going to respond to the current circumstances. If Americans are angry, they're going to favor torture. If they're feeling comfortable and secure, they're going to be against torture. I think that's the way democracy works. But if you're interested in looking at it much more seriously and making up your own mind about what's appropriate, morally and legally, you have to approach it more rigorously. And that's what I've tried to do.

**Was it difficult to do that? You've written very candidly about torture. And I imagine that some of the people you interviewed, such as the people from Amnesty International, would find this article inappropriate or even morally wrong.**

I expect that some people will condemn me for not having adopted what is generally accepted to be the humane line on this. But I think that's too easy—I think that Amnesty's position in this particular instance is too easy. They equate someone like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed with a teenager on the Ivory Coast who had his hands lopped off. I think that there's not a moral equivalent. I believe that there is a special issue posed by terrorists' plotting mass murder and that we have an obligation as a society to think long and hard about these things. Frankly, I admire Israel for having examined this thing publicly and fought it out in their courts and in their legislature. I think that level of candor is both surprising and refreshing and reflects a kind of popular concern for moral honesty that is sometimes lacking in our own country.

**But what struck me most about the Israelis is that their final consensus is a very ambiguous, muddled one. They had the 1987 Landau Commission which ruled that "moderate physical pressure" and "nonviolent psychological pressure" was acceptable. Then twelve years later, they threw that out. But coercion continues to be practiced.**

They've banned it, but they've arrived at the place where we ought to be—which is you ban it, but you practice it in certain selected cases. And those who do practice it do so at their own risk, knowing that they are violating the law and if there's a change of Administration or mood and they are caught in that switch they can end up going to jail. Certainly anyone who lived through the 1970s witnessed a rapid and dramatic switch in public mood concerning the intelligence community. And I think in the case of torture, that possibility acts as a healthy constraint over abuses—which, as the example of Israel shows, are apt to become widespread if there's a feeling of license.

**So your basic conclusion is that no law will be nuanced enough to deal with the situations in which torture might be appropriate?**

I think so. If you open that door and as Jessica Montell says, *a priori* give approval, then there's no stopping it. Because everyone will use torture; everyone will assume that his or her circumstance is justified. As long as torture is banned, you can only employ it at your own risk. And I think that's the only way of controlling the behavior of large numbers of people in a vast organization spread out over the entire world. You can't expect to write a law, or write a regulation that is going to be that subtle in all these circumstances.

**We've been talking about Israel. I'm wondering if you've encountered any examples of how other countries have dealt with torture or coercion.**

Well, the French have a reputation for being especially brutal, which probably stems from their experiences in Algeria in the 1960s where they were faced with terrorist attacks, and torture was a particularly useful way of trying to prevent them. I did not look at exactly what the practice is in other countries, although I tried to point out in the article that in many parts of the world straight out brutal torture methods are employed. My suspicion is that there is a good deal of experience with this in England because the British occupiers of Ireland were accused of employing such tactics against the IRA in the 1970s and 1980s. I was particularly interested in Israel because they had this public debate. So the answer to your question in a nutshell is no—I didn't study countries in the same way I studied Israel. But countries like England, France, and Germany—the European countries—probably follow pretty much the same practice as the United States, because the situation dictates what people do. When they're faced with a really bad circumstance, people—especially people in authority—are going to do what they feel they have to do. I would doubt that there exists a country where there's such a high level of regimentation that you wouldn't find people in authority using at least coercive methods in certain instances.

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