

Author explores CIA connections to torture tactics

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A professor of history at UW-Madison has authored a book available this month that explores evidence of a 50-year legacy of U.S. government-sponsored forms of psychological torture.

In his new book, "A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, from the Cold War to the War on Terror" (Henry Holt/Metropolitan, January 2006), historian Alfred McCoy decodes the secret language of psychological torture, signature actions that bespeak training by the Central Intelligence Agency.

When broadcast news reports first aired the photos from Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq last year, McCoy says that he was stunned to see the signposts of CIA Cold War torture techniques. "I put everything aside for an intense round of research that led to this book," McCoy says.

McCoy, a distinguished historian of the U.S. government's covert operations, has investigated many aspects of human rights issues in Southeast Asia, including CIA involvement with the heroin trade there. He says the new book documents CIA interest in psychological torture back half a century.

"The origins of the Abu Ghraib scandal and the Guantanamo controversy can be traced very directly to the 1950s, when the Central Intelligence Agency launched a massive mind-control project that discovered psychological torture. This proved an unheralded scientific breakthrough, indeed, the first real revolution in five centuries in the

cruel science of pain," McCoy says.

He goes on to say that the CIA spent the next 30 years spreading these sophisticated techniques throughout the world by training anti-communist allies, police and military in the developing world to use methods of psychological torture.

"By the end of the Cold War, these torture techniques had become so embedded in the American security apparatus that congressional legislation enacted to abolish these practices instead legalized them," he says.

The genesis of the book began in 1986, he says.

"I started studying the impact of the CIA's psychological torture paradigm on the Philippine Armed Forces, looking at the way in which it ruptured the Philippine army. The use of the CIA techniques produced six violent coup attempts against the Philippine state. Through interviews with survivors, particularly Maria Elena Ang, I learned about the protracted, devastating impact of torture upon its victims," he says.

Speaking with Ang 13 years after her torture, she was still emotionally scarred, McCoy says.

"She seemed to be suffering a lasting trauma, blocking her, already in her mid-30s, from career, marriage, children, friendship - all the meaningful things of this life. For ordinary people like her, snatched off the street and savaged, torture is not something you just walk away from."

McCoy studied this difficult topic for more than a decade, talking not only with victims but also with the military perpetrators. He says that the practices addle the perpetrators as much as the victims, although in

vastly different ways.

"Psychological torture, at least as practiced in the Philippines, is a transactional experience," he says. "It destroys the victims while simultaneously empowering the perpetrators, giving them an overwhelming sense of superhuman power. Significantly, most of the leaders of the six main coup attempts against the Philippine state in the decade after Marco's downfall were former torturers."

By 1999, McCoy was thoroughly repulsed by his subject. "I put it aside until CBS broadcast those photos from Abu Ghraib in 2004," he says.

Looking at the most famous of the photos, the hooded Iraqi on a box with wires attached to his extended arms, he could see clearly signs of the CIA's signature Cold War torture techniques, including sensory deprivation and self-inflicted pain.

"That photo indicated that this abuse was not the work of 'recycled hillbillies' on the 'night shift' at Abu Ghraib. It was instead the product of a half-century of history that reached back to the darkest recesses of the Cold War and decisions that extended all the way to the highest levels in Washington," he says.

An added catalyst in the creation of the book was an undergraduate seminar for history majors that McCoy taught last spring, CIA Covert Warfare and Conduct of U.S. Foreign Policy.

"It was my best class ever in 30 years of teaching at Yale, the University of New South Wales and here at Wisconsin," he says. "Since the focus of the discussion was analytical and empirical, students could take away whatever they wished from the class. I'll be teaching it again this spring, and I hope that students who take it emerge more aware of the costs of covert operations and the responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy."

Source: University of Wisconsin (by Barbara Wolff)

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