

American Psychological Association played critical role in CIA torture program

By David Walsh
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A report by health professionals and human rights activists has exposed the role of the American Psychological Association (APA) in collaborating with the Bush White House and the CIA in developing and defending torture and abuse of detainees in the so-called “war on terror.”

The Association officials and members who colluded with the government in its use of “enhanced interrogation techniques,” including waterboarding, “rectal hydration,” sexual humiliation, mock burials, ice water baths, sleep deprivation, “stress positions,” confinement in boxes and other barbaric practices, were operating in the tradition of Dr. Josef Mengele and other Nazi doctors who experimented on live human beings in concentration camps.

The report, “All the President’s Psychologists,” was co-authored by Stephen Soldz, professor at the Boston Graduate School of Psychoanalysis; Nathaniel Raymond, Director of the Signal Program on Human Security and Technology at the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, an anti-torture activist; and Steven Reisner, clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst and founding member of the Coalition for an Ethical Psychology.

In their preface, the authors assert, “The APA’s complicity in the CIA torture program, by allowing psychologists to administer and calibrate permitted harm, undermines the fundamental ethical standards of the profession.”

The report bases itself primarily on an analysis of emails from the accounts of the late RAND Corporation researcher and CIA contractor Scott Gerwehr, who died in 2008. The selection of emails was drawn from a larger collection obtained by *New York Times* reporter James Risen.

As one of their key findings, the authors explain that the “APA secretly coordinated with officials from the CIA, White House, and the Department of Defense to create an APA ethics policy on national security interrogations that comported with then classified legal guidance authorizing the CIA torture program.”

This was no small matter. In the spring of 2004, the exposure of the crimes committed by US intelligence and

military personnel at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq put the Bush administration on the defensive. In June, CIA director George Tenet felt obliged to sign a secret order, as Risen explained in the *New York Times* on Thursday, “suspending the agency’s use of the enhanced interrogation techniques, while asking for a policy review to make sure the program still had the Bush administration’s backing.”

“At that critical moment,” writes Risen, “the American Psychological Association took action that its critics now say helped the troubled interrogation program.” The APA convened a secret meeting in July 2004 on “Ethics and National Security,” bringing together APA, CIA, White House, Department of Defense and FBI officials, academics and others.

The email invitation to the meeting from the APA’s Ethics Director Stephen Behnke expressed its “sensitivity to and appreciation of the important work mental health professionals are doing in the national security arena,” and also promised confidentiality.

One year later, in June 2005, the APA convened its Psychological Ethics and National Security (PENS) Task Force over one weekend, and the following day the association’s board rubber-stamped the PENS policy in an “emergency vote.” The Soldz-Raymond-Reisner report notes that, “The PENS policy endorsed continued psychologist participation in national security interrogations—unlike the policies later adopted by the American Medical Association and American Psychiatric Association, which prohibited such involvement by their members.”

Revealing the thorough integration of the American Psychological Association and similar bodies into the state, the PENS task force, observes the report, “consisted heavily of uniformed and civilian psychologists from the military. Six of the nine voting PENS members were Department of Defense employees directly involved in national security interrogation practice, supervision and/or research. In addition, many of the PENS members themselves held commands or have been linked to installations where

detainee abuse had been reported.” Thus, the accomplices of torture endorsed their own continued participation in the practice.

The involvement by health professionals in the brutal program, argues Risen, “was significant because it enabled the Justice Department to argue in secret opinions that the program was legal and did not constitute torture, since the interrogations were being monitored by health professionals to make sure they were safe.”

In an email to the *Times* reporter, co-author Dr. Stephen Soldz commented, “In 2004 and 2005 the C.I.A. torture program was threatened from within and outside the Bush administration. Like clockwork, the A.P.A. directly addressed legal threats at every critical juncture facing the senior intelligence officials at the heart of the program. In some cases the A.P.A. even allowed these same Bush officials to actually help write the association’s policies.”

One of the key organizers of the meetings in 2004 and 2005 was APA Director of Science Policy Geoff Mumford. His role is significant because of his direct contact with the infamous Drs. James Mitchell and Bruce Jessen, the architects of the CIA torture program.

In a sinister August 6, 2003 email, Dr. Kirk Hubbard, Chief of Operations of the Operational Assessment Division of the CIA, wrote Mumford: “You won’t get any feedback from Mitchell or Jessen. They are doing special things to special people in special places, and generally are not available.” In other words, they were busy torturing and experimenting on prisoners.

Dr. Mumford later left the American Psychological Association and went on to work for Mitchell Jessen and Associates. The firm was paid \$81 million by the CIA to devise interrogation methods, some of which John Rizzo, the CIA’s acting general counsel, in his book *Company Man*, described as “sadistic and terrifying.”

The APA collaboration with the Bush administration was so intimate that a White House official, Susan Brandon, was permitted to “craft” language in the APA’s 2005 PENS report related to research. The document ultimately approved by the association explained, “One focus of a broad program of research is to examine the efficacy and effectiveness of information-gathering techniques, with an emphasis on the quality of information obtained. ... Also valuable will be research on cultural differences in the psychological impact of particular information-gathering methods and what constitutes cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.”

As “All the President’s Psychologists” explains, the language of the PENS Task Force “appears to call for psychologist involvement in monitoring interrogations,” in a manner consistent with May 2005 memoranda issued by the

Department of Justice’s Office of Legal Counsel that “sought to provide legal authorization for the continued use of torture and other forms of abusive interrogations.”

The final finding of the new report is that despite substantial contact between the APA, the White House and the CIA, including more than 600 emails, “there is no evidence that any APA official expressed concern over mounting reports of psychologist involvement in detainee abuse during four years of direct email communications with senior members of the US intelligence community.”

No one at the American Psychological Association, whose self-proclaimed mission is “to advance the creation, communication and application of psychological knowledge to benefit society and improve people’s lives,” in the words of the Soldz-Raymond-Reisner report, expressed “surprise, concern, or outrage regarding mounting evidence of abuses of detainees in CIA or military custody in general.”

This was, in part, because they wanted to get their hands on a lot of money. In his book *Pay Any Price*, Risen asserts that a “tight network of behavioral scientists” was “so eager for CIA and Pentagon contracts that they showed few qualms about getting involved” with institutions carrying out torture.

Beyond that, the exposés in the new report speak to the corruption and rightward shift by a considerable section of the affluent professional classes, which identifies with the American ruling elite and its drive for global domination. There is not a shred of humane or democratic consciousness in the layer exposed by “All the President’s Psychologists.” They would collaborate in the commission of any crime whatsoever.

No Bush administration or CIA official has been indicted for his or her role in the detention and torture program. The Senate Intelligence Committee report on the program, released in December 2014, has been buried by the media and forgotten. The Obama administration has pledged itself to defend the torturers, even as it proceeds with its equally criminal campaign of murder by drones. As Dr. Soldz told the WSWS in December 2014, “While torture is illegal by international law and by US domestic law, there is little disincentive for perpetrators to repeat these violations when no one is held to account.”

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