

Doing Unto Others as They Did Unto Us

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Op-Ed Contributors

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Washington — How did American interrogation tactics after 9/11 come to include abuse rising to the level of torture? Much has been said about the illegality of these tactics, but the strategic error that led to their adoption has been overlooked.

The Pentagon effectively signed off on a strategy that mimics Red Army methods. But those tactics were not only inhumane, they were ineffective. For Communist interrogators, truth was beside the point: their aim was to force compliance to the point of false confession.

Fearful of future terrorist attacks and frustrated by the slow progress of intelligence-gathering from prisoners at Guantánamo Bay, Pentagon officials turned to the closest thing on their organizational charts to a school for torture. That was a classified program at Fort Bragg, N.C., known as SERE, for Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape. Based on studies of North Korean and Vietnamese efforts to break American prisoners, SERE was intended to train American soldiers to resist the abuse they might face in enemy custody.

The Pentagon appears to have flipped SERE's teachings on their head, mining the program not for resistance techniques but for interrogation methods. At a June 2004 briefing, the chief of the United States Southern Command, Gen. James T. Hill, said a team from Guantánamo went "up to our SERE school and developed a list of techniques" for "high-profile, high-value" detainees. General Hill had sent this list - which included prolonged isolation and sleep deprivation, stress positions, physical assault and the exploitation of detainees' phobias - to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who approved most of the tactics in December 2002.

Some within the Pentagon warned that these tactics constituted torture, but a top adviser to Secretary Rumsfeld justified them by pointing to their use in SERE training, a senior Pentagon official told us last month.

When internal F.B.I. e-mail messages critical of these methods were made public earlier this year, references to SERE were redacted. But we've obtained a less-redacted version of an e-mail exchange among F.B.I. officials, who refer to the methods as "SERE techniques." We also learned from a Pentagon official that the SERE program's chief psychologist, Col. Morgan Banks, issued guidance in early 2003 for the "behavioral science consultants" who helped to devise Guantánamo's interrogation strategy (we've been unable to learn the content of that guidance).

SERE methods are classified, but the program's principles are known. It sought to recreate the brutal conditions American prisoners of war experienced in Korea and Vietnam, where Communist interrogators forced false confessions from some detainees, and broke the spirits of many more, through Pavlovian and other conditioning. Prolonged isolation, sleep deprivation, painful body positions and punitive control over life's most intimate functions produced overwhelming stress in these prisoners. Stress led in turn to despair, uncontrollable anxiety and a collapse of self-esteem. Sometimes hallucinations and delusions ensued. Prisoners who had been through this treatment became pliable and craved companionship, easing the way for captors to obtain the "confessions" they sought.

SERE, as originally envisioned, inoculates American soldiers against these techniques. Its psychologists create mock prison regimens to study the effects of various tactics and identify the coping styles most likely to withstand them. At Guantánamo, SERE-trained mental health professionals applied this knowledge to detainees, working with guards and medical personnel to uncover resistant prisoners' vulnerabilities. "We know if you've been despondent; we know if you've been homesick," General Hill said. "That is given to interrogators and that helps the interrogators" make their plans.

Within the SERE program, abuse is carefully controlled, with the goal of teaching trainees to cope. But under combat conditions, brutal tactics can't be dispassionately "dosed." Fear, fury and loyalty to fellow soldiers facing mortal danger make limits almost impossible to sustain.

By bringing SERE tactics and the Guantánamo model onto the battlefield, the Pentagon opened a Pandora's box of potential abuse. On Nov. 26, 2003, for example, an Iraqi major general, Abed Hamed Mowhoush, was forced into a sleeping bag, then asphyxiated by his American interrogators. We've obtained a memorandum from one of these interrogators - a former SERE trainer - who cites command authorization of "stress positions" as justification for using what he called "the sleeping bag technique."

"A cord," he explained, "was used to limit movement within the bag and help bring on claustrophobic conditions." In SERE, he said, this was called close confinement and could be "very effective." Those who squirmed or screamed in the sleeping bag, he said, were "allowed out as soon as they start to provide information."

Three soldiers have been ordered to stand trial on murder charges in General Mowhoush's death. Yet the Pentagon cannot point to any intelligence gains resulting from the techniques that have so tarnished America's image. That's because the techniques designed by communist interrogators were created to control a prisoner's will rather than to extract useful intelligence.

A full account of how our leaders reacted to terrorism by re-engineering Red Army methods must await an independent inquiry. But the SERE model's embrace by the Pentagon's civilian leaders is further evidence that abuse tantamount to torture was national policy, not merely the product of rogue freelancers. After the shock of 9/11 -

when Americans desperately wanted mastery over a world that suddenly seemed terrifying - this policy had visceral appeal. But it's the task of command authority to connect means and ends rationally. The Bush administration has too frequently failed to do this. And so it is urgent that Congress step in to tie our detainee policy to our national interest.

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