"IN PRAISE OF TORTURE"

By ERIC STENER CARLSON

Representative Peter King, chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, has been quoted as saying, "If we capture bin Laden tomorrow and we have to hold his head under water to find out when the next attack is going to happen, we ought to be able to do it."¹

Such talk is indicative of just how far the debate over committing torture has veered to the right. In fact, that a debate exists at all shows we have abandoned our once-renowned commitment to universal human rights.

After all, the U.S. paved the way to forming the United Nations over sixty years ago, and it is a signatory to the UN Convention Against Torture, which states “no exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war … may be invoked as a justification of torture.” (The stark monument in the Auschwitz death camp, that simply says “Never Again”, means never again genocide, never again torture.)

But let’s forget our international obligations for a moment and our commitments after WWII. Since some Americans feel the sexual assault committed at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq was a “fraternity prank,” dunking a man’s head under water may, by comparison, seem almost innocuous, a normal part of any military interrogator’s bag of tricks. Instead, let’s look at the effects such an “interrogation technique” has on the human body, and see if it’s something an average person would consider acceptable or not.

What Mr. King proposes is called “water boarding” in the U.S., but I’ve known it by a different name during my last 20 years of studying human rights violations in Argentina. The Argentine military dictatorship called it “el submarino” (“the submarine”) when they tortured thousands of unarmed civilians and a handful of guerrillas in their own version of the “War on Terror” in the late 1970s. (Although it came to be known as the “Dirty War” to the rest of the world.)

One Argentine torture survivor I once interviewed, a petite physics teacher named Silvina, gave me her impression of the “submarino”: for the torture victim, “the only thing that was important was la picana [electric wires] and el submarino. El submarino is when they put your head underwater. [By comparison] the rest, just being there [suffering the harsh conditions of the secret military prison] wasn’t considered torture.”²

The reason why *el submarino* ranks up there with being cattle-prodded is that it makes you feel like you're dying. (In fact, it will kill you if the interrogator pushes too hard.) Your throat convulses as you gasp for air – the classic gag reflex – the body shakes uncontrollably. It’s like being buried alive. In fact, it’s so awful it’s considered a mock execution, and, thus, illegal under international law.

On the topic of mock executions (in case it seems like a good idea), many torture survivors in Argentina told me that was the worst abuse. That’s because it brings you to the brink of death (both its horror and its release), only for you to be resuscitated and dragged back to your cell, with the terrible uncertainty that, in the next few minutes, they’ll drag you out and try to kill you again. That’s what repeated use of *el submarino* is, being pushed to the edge of death again and again. When you’re released – if you’re released – that feeling haunts you for the rest of your life.

Of course, it’s not a question of whether we use *el submarino* or not: our agents are already doing so. (According to news reports, U.S. interrogators were impressed that the top Al Qaeda official, Khalid Sheik Mohammed, withstood their assault for approximately two minutes before breaking.3)

The debate is over whether we should list *el submarino* as an acceptable interrogation technique, standardize it, adopt it, teach it openly, perhaps even print illustrations of it in a glossy training manual. The question is whether we should take what was, until only recently, unacceptable and embrace it full force.

I will close with another quote from a man who fell victim to a variation of *el submarino*:

I was introduced to a bowl of water, some filthy rags and a steel rod. The guards stuffed a rag in my mouth with the rod, then, after putting another rag over my face, they slowly poured the water on it until all I was breathing was water vapor. I could feel my lungs going tight with fluid and felt like I was drowning. I thrashed in panic as darkness took over. As I passed out, thinking I was dying, I remember thanking God that we had made a stand against this kind of society.4

The above quote is not from a suspected communist in Argentina’s Dirty War, nor is it from a suspected terrorist in a secret CIA prison or at Guantánamo Bay, although it could have been either. It is from an American pilot named Tom Moe captured by the Vietcong and tortured in the Hanoi Hilton in 1968.

The next time we praise torture, we should realize the company we’re keeping – from Argentine Dirty Warriors, to Vietcong interrogators, and, let’s not to forget, to Nazi death camp commandants, the twentieth century’s best reason to write the UN Convention Against Torture in the first place. Also, we should wonder if the prisoners whose heads some of our


officials want to hold under water to win this “War on Terror” would not be justified in “thank-
ing God that we had made a stand against this kind of society.”

In fact, after we adopt the same methods as our enemies, to the same effect and carry them out with the same vigor, what sort of society do we have left to defend?