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The Torture State

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2005

It is perhaps a sign of advancing age when one thinks fondly back to the days of one's youth, when you could march down the streets without having to worry about the snipers on the roof tops; when you could join a union demonstration, at least, without worrying about police firing upon you with rubber bullets and wooden blocks; when the government had to at least pretend you had committed some crime in order to lock you up; and when torture was universally condemned.

To be sure, torture was widely practiced, and not only by the brutal military dictatorships the U.S. and Soviet governments propped up around the world. In Chicago, it seems police routinely tortured suspects in order to extract convictions used to send them to jail or death row. But officials dared not admit to the world that they practiced torture, and when it became clear that the fruits of torture (among other violations of basic human rights) had sent several people to death row, Illinois' governor felt compelled to lift the death sentences of every inmate facing execution in that state. In short, torture, while practiced in back rooms and secret cells, was universally acknowledged to be abhorrent.

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Today, torture is official U.S. government policy. Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez issues legal opinions ostensibly prohibiting torture, but allowing methods including sleep deprivation, psychological abuse (lasting, but not permanent, mental damage is OK), and the infliction of pain up to (but not including) the point of death or major organ failure. International human rights agreements, he says, do not apply. Gonzalez was among the top contenders for a recent opening on the U.S. Supreme Court, but was apparently blocked by conservatives who thought he was too soft on moral values.

Homeland Security Czar Michael Chertoff required convicted Taliban supporter John Walker Lindh to sign a gag order promising not to reveal the systematic torture (the severely wounded Lindh was blindfolded and duct-taped to a stretcher for days in an unlit shipping container; denied medical care, food and water; and threatened with death to elicit his confession) to which he was subjected as a condition of his plea agreement. If U.S. citizens are treated this way by the U.S. military, one can only imagine the conditions inflicted upon Afghan or Iraqi prisoners.

Even a few “civil libertarians” now say torture is inevitable, and so call for a system of torture warrants which would allow torture so long as a judge somewhere said it was OK.

Fortunately, even if it has become official government policy, most people continue to reject torture. Human Rights Watch has called for criminal action against Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and ex-CIA Director George Tenet in a report titled *Getting Away with Torture? Command Responsibility for the U.S. Abuse of Detainees*. Human Rights Watch says there is overwhelming evidence that U.S. mistreatment and torture of prisoners took place not merely at Abu Ghraib but at facilities throughout Afghanistan and Iraq as well as at Guantanamo, and at secret locations around the world. Where U.S. torture was not rough enough, the CIA “rendered” detainees to countries where they would be subjected to more aggressive torture.

In these difficult times, the criminality of the state can be overwhelming. Yet we must continue to confront it, even as we work for the abolition of this brutal, force-propelled system.

Long ago, Mikhail Bakunin wrote that no crime was so terrible that it could not be justified “for reasons of state.” In this, as in so many things, history continues to prove him right.