An Eye-Opening Examination of Torture

Edited by Marjorie Cohn

n “The United States of Torture” a psychologist, a historian, a political scientist, a philosopher, a sociologist, two journalists, and eight lawyers offer one of the most comprehensive examinations of torture to date, with the CIA during the Cold War and ending with the debate over accountability for torture.

Preface
Sister Dianna Ortiz
Experience, we are told, is a great teacher. If this is so, then my classroom was a clandestine prison and my teachers, experts in the commission of crimes against humanity. There were others on this cruel faculty as well, drawn from two governments, the Guatemalan and my own.

It was in the fall of 1987 that my dream was realized. I had come to my new home in the highlands of Guatemala to live and work alongside the Mayan people as a Catholic missionary. My ministry was teaching children how to read and write in their native language, and with them, to celebrate their culture—a culture devalued by that country’s oligarchy. There I hoped to live the rest of my life.

That dream was short-lived, as had been the dream of democracy for the Guatemalan people. In 1954, the United States had overthrown the democratically elected government of Guatemala, whose land reform program had incurred the wrath of the United Fruit Company. During the ensuing decades, Guatemala was the scene of torture, disappearance, massacres, and death. Some 200,000 Guatemalans suffered this fate. As a long, cruel civil war raged, the government, the military, and the oligarchy committed genocide against the Mayan people. All of this occurred with the support of the U.S. government.

It was in this setting that on November 2, 1989, I was abducted by members of the Guatemalan security forces, put into a police car, blindfolded, and taken to a clandestine prison, where I encountered a world I never could have imagined. In that place, I came face to face with evil. There, my life changed forever.

So often it is assumed that torture is conducted for the purpose of gaining information. It is much more often intended to threaten populations into silence and submission. What I was to endure was a message, a warning to others—not to oppose, to remain silent, and to yield to power without question. In Guatemala, the Catholic Church sought to walk in company with the suffering poor. I was to be a message board upon which those in power would write a warning to the Church to cease its opposition or be prepared to face the full force of the state.

First came the interrogation. They played what they called a “game.” If I answered a question in a way they liked, I would be allowed to smoke. If I answered in a way they didn’t like, I would be burned with a cigarette. For every answer I gave, they burned me. Days after my escape, a doctor would find more than 111 second-degree burns on my back alone.

After they tired of this game, they gambled to see who would rape me first. “Heads, I go first,” said the policeman. After he raped me, the proud winner whispered into my ear, “Your God is dead.” (I didn’t argue.) And then the others took their turns.

I regained consciousness and found myself in a courtyard of some type. They then lowered me into an open pit filled with human bodies—bodies of children, women, and men—some decapitated, some cailed with blood, some dead, some alive. I remember them, those barely alive—crying out. Our cries joined together to become one terrible declaration of helplessness—as the rats danced about, feasting on the already dead.

The next step in my descent into hell, I was placed in a dark room. Gradually, I became aware of someone else there, terribly tortured herself, on a table, covered with a foul smelling, blood-stained sheet. We spoke briefly. Then the torturers came in, one with a video camera. They placed a knife in my hand and I felt grateful for I thought that, somehow, it was to be used to kill me. Instead, as the filming began, hands were placed over mine and the knife was thrust into the woman. Her screams meant more as my torturers gloated. When it was finished they told me, “Now, you are just like us.”

Left alone in the dark cell, I prayed to a deaf God to be rescued from this nightmare. Then I sensed someone—or something—approaching. For a moment, I thought I might actually be rescued, but as it neared me, I saw the dog’s two dark eyes and snarling teeth. It was then that all hope died.

There is more that happened during my captivity, but I will add only this. My torturers had referred to “Alejandro” as their “boss”; that’s what they called him. As they prepared to rape me again, one called out, “Hey, Alejandro, come and have some fun.” Their boss had arrived but instead of joining in, he cursed in English and then spoke to the torturers In U.S.-accented Spanish. Apparently, my disappearance had been the subject of much publicity. “Alejandro” told me he would take me to a friend of his at the U.S. embassy who would help me leave the country. I asked if he was a North American (i.e., from the United States) and he asked why I wanted to know. Then he added, referring to death threats I had received, “We tried to warn you.” We, not they— we. When we were ensnared in traffic, I jumped out of the vehicle and ran.

Immediately after my escape, I reached a religious house in Guatemala City. A friend was warned by a U.S. official that I was not to speak of “Alejandro.” However, I did, and the cost has been high. The first lie circulated by U.S. and Guatemalan officials was that I had not been tortured at all, that it was a publicity stunt to help defeat a bill in Congress dealing with military aid to Guatemala. But there were all those second-degree burns and so now the story changed. I still had not been tortured; rather, I had been involved in “kinky lesbian sex” that “got out of hand.” I already had little faith in the Guatemalan government. Now I would learn to have no faith in my own.

Upon returning to the United States, I asked my government for information about “Alejandro” and what had been done to me. I did so not only for myself but because I believed the Guatemalan people had a right to know why an American was the head of a Guatemalan torture squad, and thus, presumably, involved in the torture of that nation’s people.

I had been tortured and lied about during the administration of George H.W. Bush. Now my direct appeals to President Clinton produced nothing. One hundred and three members of Congress appealed to Mr. Clinton to release relevant documents—to no avail. A five-week silent vigil and a broad and water fast across from the White House finally produced documents, none relevant to my case. While there was nothing of value for me, one very important document came to light: the Report of the President’s Intelligence Oversight Board, dated June 1996.

In its findings, the U.S. government acknowledged the torture texts used at the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia. It is no surprise that the documents I have sought have never been released. The U.S. government, regardless of administration, protects those who order torture. Our government has been involved in this crime against humanity stretching back many years. The difference with the George W. Bush administration was that its actions were so blatant, so clear for all to see.


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