

How Do You Define Torture?

The United States government, or its agents or contractors, have used and may still be using a method of interrogation called waterboarding. It consists of binding a person to a board, wrapping his head in plastic, and then dowsing his head with water.

John Edwards, in his historical study of the Spanish Inquisition, writes: “Apart from the secrecy of denunciations and interrogations, the main question on which the Inquisition’s more recent objectors have concentrated is that of the use of torture. ... Torture was used to extract evidence [confessions] and not as a means of punishment. ... Three main methods of torment were used by the Inquisition. The first, the ‘gar-rucha’, consisted of a pulley attached to the ceiling, from which the prisoner was hung with heavy weights attached to his feet. The torture consisted of raising the accused slowly to the ceiling and letting him fall with a jerk, thus stretching and often dislocating the arms and legs. The second method, known as ‘toca’, involved tying the accused down on a rack, keeping his mouth open by force, and pouring water continuously into it through a linen cloth (or toca). The third technique, which was most commonly used after 1600, was the ‘potro’, in which the prisoner was tied to a rack with ropes that were tightened by the orders of the inquisitors. Both men and women were stripped to a few flimsy garments for these procedures, which might be repeated on numerous occasions in order to bring a prisoner to a state of submission. [*The Spanish Inquisition*, by John Edwards, 1999, Tempus Press, USA and UK, ISBN 0 7524 1770 3, p.111]

The second of the two methods of ‘interrogation’ described differs only in minor details from waterboarding. The evident effect on a prisoner is the same in either case, namely, fear of asphyxiation and panic.

Call this interrogation or torture, as you please. How clever is it of the U.S. administration to be seen to be using some of the same methods as the Spanish Inquisition?

Another method of interrogation used by U.S. forces abroad is called “stress positions”. It consists of binding a person with the arms outstretched for periods of several hours. In one case, which has been documented, this proved fatal. It involved an Afghan taxi driver; he had picked up three men, Afghans, who were suspected of having planned or participated in a rocket attack against U.S. forces in Afghanistan. All four were taken into U.S. military custody and interrogated. The three men accused of plotting a rocket attack were later released for lack of evidence. The taxi driver was handcuffed to a steel mesh on the ceiling by his wrists and suspended. This causes the blood to drain out of the arms and the heart to struggle. It is very painful. In addition to being suspended by the arms, the taxi driver’s interrogators repeatedly kicked him in the thighs using their knees. This practice too was specifically authorized. This caused not only bruising, but breakage of blood vessels in the upper legs. The U.S. coroner’s report stated the cause of death to be “homicide”.

Physiologically speaking, the Afghan taxi driver died the same death Jesus did. To be suspended by the arms is fatal, if prolonged for two or three days. The cause of death is circulatory collapse; it is agonizing. The Jews had a tradition which required that a corpse be buried before sundown on the day of death. Roman practice, out of respect for Jewish custom, provided that Jewish persons to be crucified should have their legs broken. This was not simply gratuitous nastiness; it ensured that the condemned would die within one day and thus make it possible to bury him before sundown. The point was not specifically to break the bones in the legs, but to traumatize the circulation and thus hasten death.

The order authorizing the use of “stress positions” in the interrogation of prisoners was signed by then-Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld. In his own handwriting, he added a comment at the bottom of the order to the effect that he, Rumsfeld, often stood for hours at a time. When he was later interrogated in a press conference about this macabre remark, he made light of it, saying the remark had been “humorous”.

The soldiers who interrogated the taxi driver and were the immediate cause of his death were tried and convicted. These soldiers were uneducated, brutish men who could hardly have realized that their actions might prove fatal; “they know not what they do”. What of ‘Pilate’ in this affair? What of the man who signed the order and later made light of it? Rumsfeld has not been held to account.

An innocent man crucified. The Spanish Inquisition. Not merely two isolated incidents perpetrated by wayward soldiers far down in the hierarchy, but a policy authorized from the very top. This is your war of terror, Mr. Cheney.