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Complicity: Psychology and War on Terror Abuses

Torture has been in the national news again this spring as the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence [voted last month to declassify](#) key sections of its 6,300-page report reviewing the CIA's brutal post-9/11 detention and interrogation program. While [findings already leaked](#) from the Senate report should be disturbing to all Americans, our nation's psychologists should be especially troubled by this one: *"Two contract psychologists devised the CIA's enhanced interrogation techniques and were central figures in the program's operation."* These cruel, inhuman, degrading and often torturous [techniques](#) ranged from painful stress positions to prolonged sleep deprivation to cramped confinement in a small box to waterboarding – all designed to debilitate a detainee and render him physically and psychologically helpless.

Other carefully documented [accounts](#) of psychologist involvement in the abuse and torture of prisoners at places like Guantanamo, Bagram, and CIA black sites have emerged repeatedly for nearly a decade. But the comprehensive, multi-year Senate investigation is likely to provide the most detailed account to date of how psychologists abandoned their fundamental do-no-harm ethics and participated in the horrific excesses of the "war on terror." In the past, the American Psychological Association (APA) – the world's largest organization of psychologists – has responded to similar revelations with silence, denials, unactionable platitudes, and assertions that the APA has always been steadfast in its opposition to torture. Such responses, however, conceal a distressing and unwelcome truth: that U.S. torture programs took root and grew in a climate made more hospitable by the APA leadership's support of our government's counter-terrorism strategy despite its bring-it-on, gloves-off, anything-goes tactics.

As members of the public and psychologists alike await further information from the Senate report, this is an opportune time to review the extensive evidence of APA's collaboration with the national security establishment's post-9/11 "dark side" operations. This partial list highlights key examples.

- Immediately after the horrific attacks of September 11, 2001, the APA leadership established a [subcommittee](#) to strengthen links with the CIA, the Department of Defense (DoD), and other national security agencies, provide them with psychological expertise, and learn more about their needs. According to the chair of this subcommittee (who would later become an APA president), "the most urgent task" was to position psychology as an essential national resource and to "get the message out that psychological science has a lot to contribute to the effort to combat terrorism." At the same time, the APA Board called for increased funding for behavioral research, and APA staff [worked](#) to "nurture relationships with agencies...that might use such research in applied settings." In subsequent months (and years) APA leaders were regular visitors to Capitol Hill and the Bush White House. By 2004 an APA [newsletter](#) boasted that "APA members are remarkably well-positioned within CIFA [the DoD's Counterintelligence Field Activity agency] to bring operational and research expertise to bear on counterintelligence activities."
- In December 2001 a former APA president convened a private meeting of psychological researchers and psychologists from the intelligence community at his home to brainstorm about counter-terrorism and Muslim extremism. [Among the participants](#) was one of the two contract psychologists who would shortly thereafter design the CIA's torture program. The following spring this same former APA president accepted a CIA invitation to give a three-hour lecture on "learned helplessness," based on his experimental research with dogs, at the Navy's SERE (Survival, Evasion,

Resistance, and Escape) school in San Diego. [In attendance](#) were both of the psychologists who developed the CIA's "enhanced interrogation techniques," which included waterboarding and confining a detainee in a cage called the "dog box." When this meeting was publicly revealed for the first time, the APA issued a statement characterizing as "completely false" all allegations that its former president had in any way assisted the CIA contract psychologists in developing their torture program. The APA provided no independent evidence in support of this blanket denial.

- The APA joined with the CIA in planning and holding invitation-only interrogation-related workshops for academics, law enforcement personnel, and members of the military and intelligence community. A July 2003 [workshop](#) explored "The Science of Deception: Integration of Theory and Practice." One workshop scenario examined ethically fraught research questions bearing directly on the treatment of detainees, including: "What pharmacological agents are known to affect apparent truth-telling behavior?"; "What are sensory overloads on the maintenance of deceptive behaviors?"; and "How might we overload the system or overwhelm the senses and see how it affects deceptive behaviors?" Once again the two psychologists who developed the CIA torture program were in attendance, and the effectiveness of coercive techniques was among the topics [discussed](#). The APA has [removed](#) details about this workshop from its website.
- A second APA/CIA workshop – titled "Interpersonal Deception: Integration of Theory and Practice" – took place in June 2004. That [meeting](#) was "designed to forge collaborations between operational staff working in the intelligence community and scientists conducting research on interpersonal deception." Facilitated by a RAND policy analyst and "generously funded" by the CIA, the workshop focused on interpersonal deception and effective methods for deceiving. The APA has provided little additional information about this workshop or its participants.
- Another former APA president was on the board of directors of the private firm through which the CIA contracted the two psychologists to design and implement the enhanced interrogation program. This APA member also [served](#) on a CIA professional standards board during the time the enhanced interrogation program was established. According to a former SERE military psychologist [interviewed by NPR](#), this same former APA president recruited psychologists for CIA operations in 2001 and described their "marching orders" this way: "to help America and use our skills in any way we possibly can as a psychologist."
- In mid-2003 – at a time when the CIA and DoD were resorting to extreme measures in the Bush Administration's "war on terror" – the APA leadership approved key changes to the Association's Ethics Code. Although work on certain of these revisions had commenced prior to the 9/11 attacks, the changes moved the code away from clear ethical restrictions in favor of following governmental and institutional regulations. These revisions permitted psychologists to support the harsh and coercive operations at Guantanamo, Bagram, and CIA black sites. In particular, the revision to [Standard 1.02](#) opened the door for psychologists to adopt the "Nuremberg Defense" and argue that they were not personally responsible when following orders in abusive interrogation-related activities. A [former chair of the APA's ethics committee](#) noted that this new version of 1.02 clearly communicated a shift in APA's values, allowing psychologists to violate fundamental ethics in deference to governing legal authority, including military orders.
- The APA's updated Ethics Code also lowered the bar on acceptable research practices. Under the revised [Standard 8.05](#) it became permissible for psychologists to dispense with informed consent "where otherwise permitted by law or federal or institutional regulations" (such as research for the CIA). Meanwhile, the revised [Standard 8.07](#) extended the conditions under which psychologists could employ deception in pursuing their research – as long as the subject did not experience

“severe emotional distress,” (a much higher bar than the previous code’s “discomfort, or unpleasant emotional experiences”). Again, the APA pursued these specific revisions even as the “war on terror” brought to the fore complex questions and concerns regarding the appropriate role of psychologists in counter-terrorism operations.

- In 2005, as an outgrowth of [discussions](#) with members of the intelligence community, the APA established a Task Force on Psychological Ethics and National Security (PENS) to offer policy guidance for psychologists. Despite their inherent conflicts of interest, six members of the nine-person task force were [on the payroll of the U.S. military and intelligence agencies](#), and several of them were drawn from chains of command linked to detainee abuses.

One of these task force members was the Chief Behavioral Science Consultation Team (BSCT) psychologist at Guantanamo during a period of abuse condemned by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Another member was the senior Army SERE psychologist responsible for training and oversight of all other Army SERE psychologists and for consulting to all Army psychologists involved in interrogation support. A third task force member, formerly a military psychologist at the detention center at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, subsequently [defended torture techniques](#) as not very different from psychotherapy in a radio interview. A fourth held a senior position in the DoD as the Director of Behavioral Science for the Counterintelligence Field Activity (CIFA) and had been chief operational psychologist for the CIA’s Counter-Terrorism Center, the CIA division which hired the contract psychologists to implement enhanced interrogations. This PENS member was present during at least one CIA black site interrogation carried out by the two CIA contract psychologists. A fifth member, the chief psychologist for the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, had [previously recommended](#) that standard professional ethics should *not* apply to national security work; an ethics complaint had previously been filed against him for [prisoner abuse](#) (of a US service member). And a sixth task force member was a consultant to CIFA and the DoD Criminal Investigative Task Force (CITF).

At the weekend meeting of the PENS task force, the APA’s president-elect [prohibited](#) inquiry into reported detainee abuses, and the task force endorsed without deliberation the DoD’s official stance that psychologists contributed to keeping interrogation and detention operations [“safe, legal, ethical, and effective.”](#) This claim served to legitimize the [role of psychologists](#) and other health professionals in these interrogations. It is consistent with the legal justifications for “enhanced interrogation techniques” presented by the Bush Administration Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel (the “torture memos”).

Numerous documented [irregularities](#) occurred during the PENS meeting: a high-level White House official was an undisclosed observer; the undisclosed APA staff member who played a lead role in directing the meeting was married to a Guantanamo BSCT psychologist; the liaison from the APA Board (who is the current president-elect of the APA) [introduced](#) the notion of confidentiality of the proceedings; the APA repeatedly refused to reveal the names of the task force members in response to press and APA member requests; and the [APA Board quickly approved the PENS Report](#) in an “emergency” vote, bypassing the Association’s governing Council of Representatives.

At the time of the 2005 PENS Report the APA’s president-elect [argued in favor](#) of psychologists’ contributing to “the incarceration, debilitation, or even death” of suspected perpetrators. He also [acknowledged](#) having “zero interest in entangling APA with the nebulous, toothless, contradictory, and obfuscatory treaties that comprise ‘international law.’” A year later, as APA president he [publicly castigated](#) those who raised concerns about psychologist involvement in torture and abuse, describing them as “opportunistic commentators masquerading as scholars,” and he inaccurately claimed that “no APA members have been linked to unprofessional behaviors.” He

also [compared](#) the coercive nature of detainee interrogations to child custody evaluations, criminal competency assessments, and independent disability evaluations.

- The APA has not sanctioned any member for involvement in abusive detention or interrogation operations, despite [assurances](#) almost a decade ago from the director of the APA's Ethics Office – and from every APA president since 2006 – that clear and direct action would be taken in response to unethical behavior. In the most prominent case to date, a 2008 [U.S. Senate report](#) on detainee treatment, a [leaked interrogation log](#), an [Army investigative report](#), previously classified [meeting memoranda](#), and recent reports from [The Constitution Project](#) and the [Institute on Medicine as a Profession](#) all clearly implicated an APA member in designing and participating in abusive and [torturous](#) interrogations at Guantanamo. In [one well-documented case](#), a detainee was subjected to almost daily 20-hour interrogations over the course of nearly two months; was held in isolation without contact with other detainees; was forcibly injected with excessive fluids until his limbs swelled; was frequently hooded; was stripped and forced to stand naked with female interrogators present; was straddled by a female interrogator; was forced to wear a woman's bra and had a thong placed on his head; was terrorized by military dogs; and was led around by a leash and forced to perform dog tricks. Despite this evidence, after seven years of delays the APA Ethics Office [recently decided](#) not to discipline this member. Indeed the case was never even referred to the full ethics committee for review and resolution. In its subsequent defense of this decision, the APA offered strikingly inconsistent claims in statements from the [Ethics Office](#), [the APA Board](#), and the [APA's public affairs department](#).

This is not an exhaustive list, but it is more than sufficient to convey an uncomfortable reality. Following the 9/11 attacks, the APA tragically and repeatedly supported ethically fraught CIA and DoD operations while continuing the further militarization of American psychology. During an era when organized psychology in the U.S. might have stood firmly and publicly as a bulwark against torture, the misuse of psychology, the degradation of professional ethics, and the abandonment of universal principles of human rights, the APA took a very different path.

The release of additional material from the Senate's CIA report will provide us with one more opportunity to investigate the U.S. torture program and hold perpetrators accountable. In this context, the complicity – through acts of omission and commission – of various sectors of civil society, including the press, the legal profession, and the health professions still awaits fuller examination. Given that psychologists have been central figures in the abuse and torture of our country's "war on terror" detainees, and that the APA has worked to guarantee psychologists' positioning in detention and interrogation roles, examining the APA's involvement is an appropriate starting point for this crucial work. An honest and forthright assessment is now long overdue – not only for the victims of brutality and for a trusting public, but also for future psychologists who are compelled to grapple with the deeds of their predecessors.

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