

Hawaiian Mind Games: APA Fiddles While Psychology Burns

Roy Eidelson and Stephen Soldz

The American Psychological Association has packed up and left stormy Honolulu, having concluded its 121st annual convention this past weekend. The hundreds of symposia and dozens of parties are likely to be soon forgotten. More consequential will be the APA leadership's latest victory in its long-running campaign: the stubborn obstruction of all efforts to meaningfully address the central role psychologists played in U.S. government torture and abuse of national security detainees.

As has been [reported many times](#) over the past decade, psychologists designed, implemented, supervised, researched, and provided ethical cover for abuses committed by the CIA and U.S. military. As a result, the APA has faced repeated calls to take action to prevent future abuses by members of the profession. But rather than engaging in a careful evaluation and reconsideration of the ethics of psychologists' involvement in national security settings, the Association's leaders have instead [responded](#), over and over again, with little more than empty talk and feeble resolutions devoid of any real significance. And true to form, last week the APA successfully enacted one of the most vacuous of these recurring exercises.

There's a bitter irony about the location of this most recent "triumph." The APA had last held its annual meeting in Hawaii back in 2004. That's the same year inspectors from the International Committee of the Red Cross visited the detention center at Guantanamo Bay and discovered a regime of psychological abuse "[tantamount to torture.](#)" That program was [inspired](#) by the recommendations of [two psychologists](#) who, just two months later, were advertising their CIA credentials as [exhibitors at the APA convention](#) in Honolulu. And that same weekend, nine years ago, an [APA presidential citation](#) was awarded to the former chief psychologist of that same Guantanamo facility, "for his exemplary balance of professional psychology and military leadership."

Nine years is a long time, but apparently not long enough for APA leaders to recognize that the ethics code should not cater to the interests and bidding of the military and intelligence establishment. Last week the APA's governing body, its Council of Representatives, endorsed this troubling status quo by officially approving a new policy document that "consolidates" several previous policy documents.

The consolidation effort was the 18-month project of the Board-endorsed "[Member-Initiated Task Force.](#)" The initiative's real intent was never hard to discern. It was a direct response to growing calls for [annulment and repudiation](#) of the APA's infamous 2005 report on psychological ethics and national security (the PENS Report). As well, several members of this five-person task force were vocal opponents of the successful 2008 [membership-wide referendum](#) – opposed by APA leadership – that placed clear constraints on the involvement of psychologists in national security settings (while expressing verbal support for their members' wishes, the APA has failed to enforce this referendum). And one

of the task force members is currently [president of a major defense contractor](#) that has received tens of millions of dollars from the Department of Defense and related agencies (a fact conveniently [hidden from visitors](#) to the task force website).

Not surprisingly, the newly approved consolidated policy document grants cover to the [PENS Report](#) mentioned above, the [source of controversy and outrage](#) ever since its release eight years ago. In 2005, the PENS Task Force met amid great secrecy. It was [dominated](#) by representatives of the military and intelligence agencies, and a psychologist serving as a policy official for the Bush-Cheney White House was among the [undisclosed observers](#). In short order the task force offered its own biased and self-serving interpretation of the APA's ethics code, an interpretation that was hastily endorsed by the APA Board in an "emergency" vote.

The PENS Report asserted that it is ethical for psychologists to serve in various national security-related roles, including as consultants to detainee interrogations – despite compelling evidence of [psychologists' ethical misconduct](#) in these arenas. The APA leadership went even further, promoting the claim that psychologists help to ensure that interrogation and detention operations are "[safe, legal, ethical, and effective.](#)" Derived from the discredited "torture memos," this was precisely the language provided to task force members – in advance of their meeting – by the Department of Defense supervisor of psychologists engaged in interrogation support. Last week's action by APA's Council rescinded the tarnished PENS Report, but its policy prescriptions and presumptions – the illegitimate foundation for many of the APA's subsequent resolutions and statements – were cleverly and carefully retained in the new consolidated document.

It is regrettable that APA's Council endorsed a new policy document that purports to provide clear ethical guidance to psychologists who work in national security settings – when in fact it does nothing of the sort. But this decision is all the more disturbing when one considers the crucial steps that APA leadership [could](#) take, but has [chosen not to](#).

APA could fully implement and enforce the 2008 member referendum prohibiting psychologists from working in national security settings (like Guantanamo) that violate the U.S. Constitution or international law. It could repudiate the PENS Report by officially acknowledging that the process was deeply flawed and illegitimate. It could [sanction members](#) who have violated the ethics code in their national security work, and it could remove the statute of limitations for violations involving torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. It could remove ethics code loopholes allowing researchers to dispense with informed consent in national security research. It could establish [clear ethical restrictions](#) on psychologist involvement in national security operations and research where individuals are targeted for harm, where voluntary informed consent is absent, and where timely outside ethical oversight is infeasible. It could formally support [bills](#) introduced in state legislatures that would prohibit licensed health provider participation in the ill treatment of prisoners. And APA could invite and cooperate with an independent investigation of the crucial roles psychologists played in U.S. government torture and other abuse, and of any [collusion](#) by the Association itself. This would be an invaluable step toward developing meaningful measures aimed at preventing future abuses

by members of the profession and promoting greater transparency, accountability, and institutional reform in the APA.

But none of these essential initiatives was anywhere to be found on this year's agenda in Hawaii. Instead, the action by APA's Council was the equivalent of repairing a structurally defective bridge by giving it a new coat of paint. The fresh coat makes the bridge more attractive to unsuspecting drivers, but it completely ignores the urgent need to replace the rotting supports just below the water's surface. Still transfixed by the lure of "war on terror" opportunities for psychologists, the APA has created its own ticking time bomb. Victories of bureaucratic authority and intransigence are rarely worth savoring for very long. They do nothing to stop current or future abuses, and far too often they are harbingers of disaster.

Addendum. Prior to the vote by Council, the [Coalition for an Ethical Psychology](#) (of which we are both members) asked proponents of the new policy to describe the "clear guidance" it would supposedly provide in regard to five scenarios, which we have reproduced below. The first three are based on actual events, the fourth reflects the current responsibilities of [Behavioral Science Consultation Team](#) (BSCT) psychologists, and the fifth is a likely scenario under current Department of Defense policies.

We did not receive any responses to our request. But certainly the real measure of a policy in this area is whether it clearly constrains unethical behavior. So we renew our invitation to APA representatives to explain, based on the new policy, whether these scenarios would constitute violations of the APA's code of ethics.

1. A Behavioral Science Consultation Team (BSCT) psychologist picks up three adolescent boys under the age of 16 from Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan and transports them to Guantanamo. During the entire 22-hour flight they are dressed in diapers and orange jumpsuits, and chained to the floor in uncomfortable positions. At Guantanamo, the same psychologist is in charge of the boys' interrogation, and claims this role enables him to protect their health.

2. A Guantanamo interrogator seeks to obtain a confession to justify an adolescent prisoner's detention. Concerned that this juvenile is experiencing severe psychological distress, as indicated by his talking to pictures on the wall and crying for his mother, the interrogator asked a BSCT psychologist to observe the next session. This psychologist recommends that the youth be placed in linguistic isolation, where no one speaks his language, and that he be told his family wants nothing to do with him. "Make him as uncomfortable as possible. Work him as hard as possible," she writes in her recommendations to the interrogator.

3. A psychologist at a military detention center helps to write and implement Standard Operating Procedures mandating that all new prisoners be subjected to 30 days of isolation indefinitely renewable. The purpose of the Behavior Management Plan is "to enhance and exploit the disorientation and disorganization felt by a newly arrived detainee in the

interrogation process. It concentrates on isolating the detainee and fostering dependence of the detainee on his interrogator.” After this SOP is promulgated, other psychologists are involved in the process of deciding when the isolation has been sufficient and the prisoner should be released into the general population.

4. A BSCT psychologist at Guantanamo is asked to evaluate the likelihood that a prisoner who has been imprisoned without evidence for over a decade will “return to the struggle” if given his freedom. If the psychologist concludes that this is more than a trivial possibility, the prisoner may continue to be indefinitely detained, perhaps for the rest of his life.

5. The Army Field Manual allows the following interrogation techniques in certain circumstances:

a. Emotional Fear-Up Approach: “the HUMINT collector identifies a preexisting fear or creates a fear within the source. He then links the elimination or reduction of the fear to cooperation on the part of the source.”

b. Emotional Fear-Down Approach: “the HUMINT collector mitigates existing fear in exchange for cooperation on the part of the source.”

c. Emotional-Pride and Ego-Up Approach: “It exploits a source’s low self-esteem.”

d. Emotional-Pride and Ego-Down Approach: “is based on attacking the source’s ego or self image.”

e. Emotional-Futility Approach: “the HUMINT collector convinces the source that resistance to questioning is futile. This engenders a feeling of hopelessness and helplessness on the part of the source.”

A psychologist consults on an interrogation based upon these authorized techniques.

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