

Physicians for Human Rights

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://phr.org/our-work/resources/twenty-years-of-the-u-s-torture-regime/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

This year marks two decades since the deadly terror attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. On this occasion, PHR joins the world to remember the thousands who perished on that day and to honor the many first responders including medics, physicians, nurses, firefighters, police officers, and so many others who rushed to the front lines in response.

It is also a moment to look back on the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, namely the war on terror, in which the Bush administration began dismantling longstanding prohibitions against torture in U.S. and international law and implemented systematic policies of psychological and physical torture policies which continue to cause harm and suffering to this day.

Today, 20 years after the 9/11 attacks, PHR continues its advocacy for transparency and accountability for the U.S. torture program, but also against torture and for the rights of survivors globally.

Since the 2001 attacks, PHR has investigated and exposed the severe health impact of the U.S. governments illegal and inhumane interrogation and detention practices on [national security detainees](#). In a powerful series of reports and scientific papers, we revealed how the United States enhanced interrogation program and other torture techniques inflicted profound and long-lasting psychological and physical pain and trauma on the men it targeted. We also showed how it undermined professional ethics and challenged trust in the health professions who participated in the planning and implementation of these cruel and harmful practices.

PHR has brought the full force of our research and advocacy against the torture practices that followed 9/11. Through numerous [investigations and reports](#), we have exposed the profound physical and psychological harms inflicted on U.S. detainees by these torture methods, including waterboarding, sensory and sleep deprivation, years of indefinite detention, solitary confinement, sexual assault and humiliation, and force-feeding.

PHR documentation has also shed light on the role of medical professionals who designed and carried out these horrific abuses. Psychologists designed the enhanced interrogation methods that the United States previously recognized as torture and oversaw their use, with other health professionals, at secret CIA black sites around the world. Similar techniques were used at military detention facilities in Guantanamo Bay, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Our investigations have shown unequivocally how the post-9/11 torture program also constituted an [illegal regime of human subject research](#) on unwilling subjects one of the gravest breaches of medical ethics in U.S. medical history.

Today, 20 years after the 9/11 attacks, PHR continues its advocacy for transparency and accountability for the U.S. torture program, but also against torture and for the rights of survivors globally, including through our role in the continued development of the groundbreaking [Istanbul Protocol](#).

PHR also takes this occasion to recognize the many health professionals who have worked tirelessly over these decades to document and expose the impact of torture carried out by the United States: we thank Brigadier General (Ret) Stephen Xenakis, Dr. Scott Allen, Dr. Sondra Crosby, Dr. Vincent Iacopino, Dr. Stephen Soldz, Dr. Steven Reisner, Dr. Allen Keller, and so many others who have worked so persistently with PHR and through their networks to call attention to the violations and to press for transparency and accountability.

As we reflect on the 20th anniversary of September 11 the tragic loss of life and the actions of first responders and Flight 93 passengers we must strive to understand the full scope of that days horror, including the tragic mistakes that the U.S. government made in its war on terror, resulting in the needless deaths of thousands of U.S. troops and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi and Afghan civilians, and the incalculable suffering from the systematic torture of thousands of innocent people.

The pursuit of justice should never undermine the rule of law. To honor the victims and heroes of 9/11, we must recognize the full scope of inhumanity that 9/11 represents and, now more than ever, work together across the lines that divide us, nationally and internationally, to ensure peace, justice, and respect for the dignity of all people.

Vincent Iacopino, MD, PhD, PHR senior medical expert, and Juan E. Mndez, former UN Special Rapporteur on torture speak with Anthony Romero, executive director of the ACLU and PHR board member.

The report by Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) and [Physicians for Human Rights](#) (PHR) details widespread medical deficiency at the Guantanamo Bay detention center and finds systemic and longstanding deficiencies in care, including the subordination of medical needs to security functions resulting in the denial of care, patient distrust of medical professionals due to a history of medical complicity in torture, patient neglect, rapid rotation of medical professionals in and out of Guantanamo causing discontinuity of care, and denial to detainees of access to their own medical records.

Based on an analysis of thousands of pages of documents and years of research, PHR shows that the CIAs post-9/11 torture program

constituted an illegal, unethical regime of experimental research on unwilling human subjects. In this report, PHR researchers show that CIA contract psychologists James Mitchell and Bruce Jessen created a research program in which health professionals designed and applied torture techniques and collected data on tortures effects. This constitutes one of the gravest breaches of medical ethics by U.S. health personnel since the Nuremberg Code was developed in the wake of Nazi medical atrocities committed during World War Two.

The Senate torture report documents the abuses that followed the development of a comprehensive program of detainee torture by CIA personnel with the help of psychologists James Mitchell and Bruce Jessen. This briefing paper, based on the Senate torture report, analyzes the operational goal of Mitchell and Jessen and its effect in destroying human beings using methods and practices long recognized as torture.

On December 9, 2014, the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence released the executive summary, findings, and conclusions of its 6,700-page report on the CIAs post-9/11 torture program. This detailed review of the 500-page executive summary analyzes evidence of medical complicity in torture and shows how health professionals who participated in the CIA torture program violated core ethical principles common to all healing professions.

PHRs 2010 publication, Experiments in Torture, is the first report to reveal evidence indicating that U.S. military and intelligence medical personnel allegedly engaged in illegal experimentation on prisoners captured after 9/11, in addition to the previously disclosed crime of torture. Those experiments observed and analyzed the physical and psychological impact on detainees of the use of enhanced interrogation techniques.

This white paper, published in August 2009, examines specifics of the May 2004 CIA Inspector Generals Report, which demonstrated that health professionals played a leading role in establishing an unethical medical premise upon which attorneys rationalized an illegal program of torture.

This 2008 report examines the dangerous consequences of unlawful U.S. interrogation practices. It specifically focuses on the extreme torture and suffering of men, who were never charged of any crimes, in detention facilities in Iraq.

This landmark 2007 report for the first time revealed and documented medical evidence confirming the first-hand accounts of the excruciating pain and continued suffering of men who, never charged with any crime, endured torture at U.S. detention facilities in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantanamo Bay. The report demonstrated that the authorization of these techniques, whether practiced alone or in combination, may constitute torture and/or cruel and inhuman treatment, and may place interrogators at serious legal risk of prosecution for war crimes and other violations.

As evidence of U.S. national security interrogation practices emerged, it became clear that psychologically abusive methods of interrogation were at the core of U.S. intelligence gathering. Break Them Down, published by PHR in May 2005, was the first comprehensive review of the use of psychological torture by U.S. forces, examining the devastating health consequences of psychological coercion and explaining how a regime of psychological torture was put into place in the U.S. war on terror.

In a 2004 statement, PHR calls on the United States government to disclose the involvement of health professionals in making detainees fit for torture/ill treatment. PHR also calls on for an end to the transfer of detainees for interrogation in other countries known to employ torture techniques such as hooding, beatings, soaking water, and deprivation of food, light and medications.

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