

Physicians for Human Rights

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

<https://phr.org/news/enhanced-interrogation-architect-dr-james-mitchells-testimony-at-guantanamo-highlights-his-role-in-u-s-torture-debasement-of-psychological-ethics-phr/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Psychologist Dr. James Mitchell architect of the CIA's enhanced interrogation program and a key figure in health professionals' shameful record of participation in torture [is testifying](#) for the first time before a U.S. military court at Guantanamo Bay. His accounting of why and how the United States inflicted torture on detainees offers a new window into the extreme abuses that occurred and the perverse efforts to develop and justify these criminal techniques.

Showing little remorse, the discredited psychologist said he [would do it again](#). He also [reportedly](#) testified that the CIA took the program beyond where he was willing to take it.

As nearly two decades of Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) research and advocacy have made clear, the post-September 11 U.S. torture program constituted a systematic, illegal, and unethical regime of human rights violations. The complicity of health professionals like Dr. James Mitchell and his collaborator, Dr. Bruce Jessen, represents one of the gravest breaches of medical ethics in U.S. history.

PHR published a [series](#) of groundbreaking reports and papers analyzing the severe pain and suffering caused by the so-called enhanced interrogation techniques, a euphemism for torture, and documenting the U.S. government's authorization and use of these criminal interrogation methods on detainees. PHR has also exposed the unethical and illegal role of health professionals in the development and implementation of these violations of human rights:

A curated list of research relevant to Mitchell's testimony and health professionals' complicity in torture is included at the bottom of this release.

In response to Dr. Mitchell's Guantanamo testimony, psychologist [Dr. Stephen Soldz](#), PHR anti-torture advisor and a leading expert on the roles of psychologists in U.S. detention abuses, provided the following statement. Dr. Soldz is available for interview; please contact media@phr.org for more information.

This week's testimony by former CIA contract psychologist Dr. James Mitchell illustrates yet again the brutality of the U.S. government's decision to resort to torture after 9/11. It also reflects what a profound mistake it is to have psychologists serve as interrogators or intelligence officers. Psychologists are professionals dedicated to improving the welfare and relieving the suffering of people; they commit to do no harm.

The role of psychologists in national security interrogations has been a subject of major debate within the psychological profession and its largest association, the American Psychological Association (APA), since shortly after the 9/11 attacks. This participation was defended by claims that psychologist involvement would keep interrogations safe, legal, ethical, and effective. While Dr. Mitchell's testimony is still in its early stages, it has already revealed the absurdity of this argument.

Regardless of any claims made by the CIA at the time of the torture program, experience since then has definitively shown that the program was not safe. Follow-up psychological evaluations of those tortured by the CIA have shown that many suffered severe, life-altering psychological harm that undercut any claim that the enhanced interrogation techniques were not torture.

After such harm has been clearly documented, the fact that Dr. Mitchell told the court today that he would do it again is appalling.

In his testimony, Dr. Mitchell also detailed what he called abusive drift among staff and authorizing officials that caused already-vicious interrogations to become even more brutal. Dr. Mitchell described his failure to constrain such drift toward ever greater violence, reporting that his continued involvement in the detainee interrogation program was contingent upon him agreeing to escalating levels of brutality, authorized by U.S. government superiors.

Dr. Mitchell's testimony also illustrated how psychological expertise can be exploited to provide a scientific patina for torture while offering sanitized language to protect its promoters from fully grappling with its inherent violence. Dr. Mitchell provided a supposedly scientific theory learned helplessness as a rationale for torture. He further claimed that the experience of U.S. service members, who were voluntarily subjected to time-limited, milder versions of torture techniques under highly controlled conditions in the military's SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape) program, provided evidence that the techniques were safe when applied involuntarily with much greater intensity against helpless and imprisoned detainees. These detainees were already subjected to highly stressful and terrifying conditions of confinement, such as continual darkness, constant white noise, and chaining in painful conditions for long periods.

Dr. Mitchell's testimony should provoke deep soul-searching among the psychology community about how to preserve the ethical

foundations of the profession. I hope it will lead to an examination of how national security operations can be inconsistent with the psychological professions imperative to do no harm.

Dr. Soldz Bio:

Dr. Soldz, a clinical psychologist and professor at the Boston Graduate School of Psychoanalysis, co-founded the Coalition for an Ethical Psychology. The Coalition has been in the forefront of efforts to withdraw psychologists from aiding abusive interrogations in U.S. Department of Defense and CIA facilities. Dr. Soldz has published numerous professional articles, book chapters, and popular articles on U.S. torture, the roles of psychologists and the American Psychological Association in U.S. detention abuses, and related areas of professional ethics. Dr. Soldz has been a psychological consultant on several Guantanamo detainee legal cases. Dr. Soldz is a past president of Psychologists for Social Responsibility and is a member of the APAs Council of Representatives. He is an anti-torture advisor for Physicians for Human Rights and was a co-author of PHRs reports [Experiments in Torture](#) and [Doing Harm](#).

Additionally, psychologist [Dr. Steven Reisner](#) PHR psychological ethics advisor and a leading expert on the roles of psychologists in U.S. detention abuses provided the following statement on Dr. Mitchell's testimony. Dr. Reisner is available for interview; please contact media@phr.org.

James Mitchell once again uses alleged threats to the homeland to justify Americas violation of the domestic and international laws against torture. His statements are consistent with similar arguments offered by the Justice Department under the Bush administration that the gloves come off and the rule of law can be abandoned whenever the government deems it appropriate.

However, for thousands of years, doctors have taken an oath to use their skills in the interest of doing good, which can be a check on the potential excesses of government or authority. Psychologists adhere to an ethics code with an identical mandate to do no harm.

James Mitchell is a living example of the harm doctors and psychologists do when they deviate from this ethical obligation. We are living in a time when government policy is determined less by law or ethical practice, but by the whim and power of the executive branch. We are living in a time when the President shows his support for those who torture and commit war crimes. The danger we face as a society when we acquiesce to hate-driven justifications for abuse and torture is great. We lose our very humanity and act as a frightened mob.

Speaking as a Jew whose parents were tortured my mother by the Nazis and my father by the Soviets I know how easy it is for governments to use fear and rage to justify cruelty and abuse. The only protection we have in such times is for citizens and professionals to refuse to violate human rights and their own ethical standards. It is time for every health professional and every citizen to speak out in response to James Mitchell's justifications for torture.

There simply can be no justification for torture. Physicians for Human Rights has documented the slippery slope doctors and psychologists go down once the first torture protocol is accepted. Hundreds of detainees were tortured and no useful information was garnered from the effort. But the United States became a more brutal country and our people have become more willing to accept government-approved atrocity. Overruling the laws against torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment threatens the character of our nation and the rule of law not only for detainees but for all of us.

Dr. Reisner Bio:

Dr. Steven Reisner, a clinical psychologist and political activist, co-founded the Coalition for an Ethical Psychology. The Coalition has been in the forefront of efforts to change the ethics policy of the American Psychological Association, making it clearly a violation of its ethics code for psychologists to be present at sites that systematically violate international human rights law or to participate in national security interrogations. Dr. Reisner has been a consultant on issues of trauma, torture, political violence, disaster, and resilience for the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, the Council of Europe, and other international organizations. He is the creator and host of MADNESS: The Podcast, which works to bring psychology back to its primary position of serving the people rather than serving either the government or capitalism. Dr. Reisner has published in and interviewed for the nation's leading news outlets and has been on the teaching faculty of the clinical psychology program at Columbia University, the international trauma studies program at New York University, the NYU Medical School, the Psychoanalytic Association of New York, and the Womens Therapy Center Institute. Dr. Reisner is a psychological ethics advisor to PHR and was a co-author on the PHR report [Experiments in Torture](#).

Additional resources related to the U.S. torture program and health professionals participation:

[Break Them Down: Systematic Use of Psychological Torture by U.S. Forces](#)

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.

[Leave No Marks: Enhanced Interrogation Techniques and the Risk of Criminality](#)

This landmark 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. PHR-mobilized health professionals conducted intensive clinical evaluations of the men, documenting practices used to bring about long-lasting pain, terror, humiliation, and shame. 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.

[Experiments in Torture: Evidence of Human Subject Research and Experimentation in the Enhanced Interrogation Program](#)

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.

Doing Harm: Health Professionals Central Role in the CIA Torture Program

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 CIA's 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.

Truth Matters: Accountability for CIA Psychological Torture

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.

Nuremberg Betrayed: Human Experimentation and the CIA Torture Program

Based on an analysis of thousands of pages of documents and years of research, PHR shows that the CIA's 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 torture's 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.

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) is a New York-based advocacy organization that uses science and medicine to prevent mass atrocities and severe human rights violations. [Learn more here.](#)

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