

Human Rights Watch

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

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President Bush is urging Congress to let the CIA keep using "alternative" interrogation procedures -- which include, according to published accounts, forcing prisoners to stand for 40 hours, depriving them of sleep and use of the "cold cell," in which the prisoner is left naked in a cell kept near 50 degrees and doused with cold water.

Bush insists that these techniques are not torture -- after all, they don't involve pulling out fingernails or applying electric shocks. He even says that he "would hope" the standards he's proposing are adopted by other countries. But before he again invites America's enemies to use such "alternative" methods on captured Americans, he might benefit from knowing a bit of their historical origins and from hearing accounts of those who have experienced them. With that in mind, here are some suggestions for the president's reading list.

He might begin with Robert Conquest's classic work on Stalin, "The Great Terror." Conquest wrote: "When there was time, the basic [Soviet Secret police] method for obtaining confessions and breaking the accused man was the 'conveyor' -- continual interrogation by relays of police for hours and days on end. As with many phenomena of the Stalin period, it has the advantage that it could not easily be condemned by any simple principle. Clearly, it amounted to unfair pressure after a certain time and to actual physical torture later still, but when? . . . At any rate, after even twelve hours, it is extremely uncomfortable. After a day, it becomes very hard. And after two or three days, the victim is actually physically poisoned by fatigue. It was as painful as any torture."

Conquest stated: "Interrogation usually took place at night and with the accused just roused -- often only fifteen minutes after going to sleep. The glaring lights at the interrogation had a disorientating effect." He quoted a Czech prisoner, Evzen Loebel, who described "having to be on his feet eighteen hours a day, sixteen of which were devoted to interrogation. During the six-hour sleep period, the warder pounded on the door every ten minutes. . . . If the banging did not wake him, a kick from the warder would. After two or three weeks, his feet were swollen and every inch of his body ached at the slightest touch; even washing became a torture."

Conquest quoted a Polish prisoner, Z. Stypulkowski, from 1945: "Cold, hunger, the bright light and especially sleeplessness. The cold is not terrific. But when the victim is weakened by hunger and sleeplessness, then the six or seven degrees above the freezing point make him tremble all the time. . . . After fifty or sixty interrogations with cold and hunger and almost no sleep, a man becomes like an automaton -- his eyes are bright, his legs swollen, his hands trembling. In this state, he is often convinced he is guilty."

Next on the list: Aleksander Solzhenitsyn's "The Gulag Archipelago." Solzhenitsyn describes the experience of prisoner Anna Skripnikova in 1952: "Sivakov, Chief of the Investigative Department of the Ordzhonikidze State Security Administration, said to her: 'The prison doctor reports you have a blood pressure of 240/120. That's too low, you bitch! We're going to drive it up to 340 so you'll kick the bucket, you viper, and with no black and blue marks; no beatings; no broken bones. We'll just not let you sleep.' And if, back in her cell, after a night spent in interrogation, she closed her eyes during the day, the jailer broke in and shouted: 'Open your eyes or I'll haul you off that cot by the legs and tie you to the wall standing up.'"

Elsewhere, Solzhenitsyn writes: "Sleeplessness . . . befogs the reason, undermines the will, and the human being ceases to be himself, to be his own 'I.'"

Finally, the president might review the memoirs of former Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin, who describes experiencing sleep deprivation in a Soviet prison in the 1940s: "In the head of the interrogated prisoner a haze begins to form. His spirit is wearied to death, his legs are unsteady, and he has one sole desire: to sleep, to sleep just a little, not to get up, to lie, to rest, to forget. . . . Anyone who has experienced this desire knows that not even hunger or thirst are comparable with it. . . . I came across prisoners who signed what they were ordered to sign, only to get what the interrogator promised them. He did not promise them their liberty. He promised them -- if they signed -- uninterrupted sleep!"

The Soviets understood that these methods were cruel. They were also honest with themselves about the purpose of such cruelty -- to brutalize their enemies and to extract false confessions, rather than truthful intelligence. By denying this, President Bush is not just misleading us. He appears to be deceiving himself.

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