

Witness Against Torture

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

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Newsletters

Stephen Vladeck, a professor at the University of Texas School of Law, said U.S. law did not impose any obligations on the government once detainees were no longer in its custody. Once we cut ties, there really are no remedies under U.S. law, he said.

[Attorney Gary] Thompson said the situation was even more frustrating than Guantanamo. Before, we could at least file a petition for habeas corpus, we could at least get on a plane and go to Guantanamo. We at least had procedures, even if they were kangaroo procedures, he said. This is deeply frustrating because there is no process.

June 21, 2018

By Helen Schietinger

Haspel the Torturer

On May 9th seven human rights activists spoke out at Gina Haspel's Senate confirmation hearing. When I stood up, the first words out of my mouth were, "The question is, what did you do to human beings in U.S. custody?" I was referring to the Muslim men tortured in the secret CIA prison Haspel was in charge of, but the question could also be asked of another administration head, Jeff Sessions, about the now over 11,000 unaccompanied children being jailed indefinitely in ICE detention centers, including over 3,000 who were cruelly separated from their parents at the border. It is clear that neither the president nor Congress is willing to recognize our responsibility as a nation to respect the human rights of all human beings, including the right not to be imprisoned without just cause, much less the right not to be tortured.

In Senator Roy Blount's banter with Haspel during the hearing, he noted that "truth to power" is a "time-honored tradition" of the CIA. Haspel replied that bringing truth to power is her favorite CIA motto. Already outraged at the whitewashing of the language of torture by the Democratic Senators and the accolades being heaped upon Haspel by the Republican Senators, I felt compelled to invoke that time-honored tradition by asking Haspel what no senator was willing to ask her: "What did you do to human beings in U.S. custody?" The answer was pretty obvious to me: you tortured them.

But even before addressing the grotesque fact of now CIA head Haspel having been in charge of torturing human beings, let's go back to the fact of the US taking people into custody without due process in the first place, often indefinitely. We live in a country that now is holding hundreds of thousands of human beings in prisons and "detention centers" -- and perhaps black sites as well, although with so much state secrecy we have no way of knowing. And decent people are rising to the demand to speak truth to power.

WAT member David Barrows paid his fine for speaking out in Haspel's confirmation hearing and then a week later attended the full Senate session where she was confirmed. As many of us know, David has a booming voice, and he made a powerful [statement](#) to that august body:

You senators who vote to approve a human torturer and destroyer of evidence of human rights violations are violators yourselves of the Geneva Conventions, the Convention Against Torture and you violate the Nuremberg principles. Hitler, too, had lawyers to excuse torture. All my life the CIA has committed crimes against humanity. No one has ever been held accountable. We tortured 3,000 Vietnamese to death under Operation Phoenix. The CIA has overthrown four democracies: Iran, Guatemala, Chile

Asylum Seekers and their Children

Although torture has unfortunately receded from mainstream consciousness, across the country decent people are being moved to speak truth to power against the administration's indefinite detention of asylum seekers at our borders. The

administration's justifying rhetoric invokes a brand of isolationist nationalism that is not only cruel, it's unAmerican.

The administration added a cruel strategy to punish refugees who enter our country: in the past three months, over 3,000 infants and children have been jailed, separately from their parents, ostensibly to send a warning for other parents not to have the audacity to flee dangerous situations with their children. When media coverage was substantial a massive public reaction followed.

The outrage over these vulnerable children being taken from their parents has not only mobilized the people; our elected leaders are speaking out. Senator Nelson and US Representative Wasserman Schultz [challenged](#) the administration after being refused entry to a detention center holding vulnerable minors. ICE assures that detained children have all their needs met, but the cloak of secrecy prevents us from knowing.

The word democracy can't be used for a government in which elected representatives are not allowed access to the State's prisons. While the president has now ostensibly reversed the policy of separating families, lack of transparency and expressed unwillingness to reunite families already torn apart indicate that the injustice continues.

Refugees and Their Families

Communities are speaking out about other ruthless anti-immigrant activities. Immigrants living and working productively in communities throughout the US have increasingly been terrorized by the fear of imprisonment and deportation. ICE oversees [internment camps](#) which contain "a hidden population of detainees who are effectively forever prisoners of the agency..... in 2015 ICE detained more than 355,000 people some 3,166 of them had been held for more than a year, including 169 for more than three years, 32 for more than five years, and five for more than eight years." Communities across the country have mobilized to protest this outrageous policy and support the impacted immigrants.

On June 6, 2018, heavily armed ICE agents backed by helicopters and dogs [raided](#) two garden stores in Sandusky, Ohio, arresting 115 employees. Alarmed by the raids, the community centered its concern on the impact of the arrests on the families. WAT member Josie Setzler and Tiffin Area Pax Christi helped organize a [Rally for Justice in Immigration](#). According to local news, "People gathered at Suhr Park ... to let the country know they wouldn't remain quiet about more than 100 people being taken away from their families and the community." Fifteen-year-old Natalie Alonzo and her friends organized "Los Ninos de Corsos" to raise money for the families whose bread-winners had been taken into the black hole of ICE, where lawyers and family-members have no idea if and when their loved ones are to be deported.

Grass-roots organizations such as [No More Deaths/No Mas Muertes](#) have long attempted to help prevent asylum-seekers crossing the US-Mexico border from dying in the desert. WAT and No More Death member Paula Miller says that volunteers putting out water and providing first aid to vulnerable immigrants in the desert risk being prosecuted themselves for assisting and harboring "illegal aliens."

The People Speak Truth to Power

So what do we do? We speak truth to power. Those with the power -- whether Senators or heads of agencies -- may attempt to co-opt our ideas and phrases, but they can't stop us from resisting and challenging their insidious double-think. Entire communities are speaking truth to power over the injustice of ICE's accelerating overreach. The world is watching.

On June 20, the United Nations observed World Refugee Day. Not many Americans may know about World Refugee Day, but we do know it's wrong to lock up people who are fleeing danger or economic disaster, and especially wrong to separate children from their parents.

WAT will stand with Justice for Muslims Collective on June 26th, the UN International Day in Support of Survivors of Torture, remembering especially the Muslim men who have been held for over 15 years and tortured in Guantanamo prison. We will continue to challenge torture by agents of the US that has gone unpunished.

We who choose to speak truth to power in the halls of Congress will continue our witness. Of those arrested for speaking out against Haspel's confirmation, four are still in court. Medea Benjamin, Tighe Barry and Pete Perry paid fines, and Janice Sevre-Duszynska will go to trial on July 16th. Ray McGovern, who was knocked to the ground and injured by the police after speaking in the hearing, was charged with resisting arrest and disrupting Congress and has a hearing on July 23rd. I was charged with disrupting Congress and have a hearing on July 25th. David Barrows has a hearing on July 11th for his speech from the Senate Gallery.

Is it enough? It depends on what you consider enough. We certainly weren't able to prevent Haspel's inevitable confirmation, any more than we've been able to hold her and others accountable for facilitating torture of human beings in their custody. In the hearing, it was suggested that waterboarding is illegal now, but that it was legal when Haspel was in charge of the

prison. Somehow, the fact that Congress passed a law making waterboarding illegal wiped out the fact that this modern-day euphemism for a medieval torture method was already illegal in U.S. law, international law and in the Constitution. Why was there not one Senator on the Committee able to insist on this fact, and by extrapolation, to ask why Haspel and numerous other high-level U. S. officials are not being prosecuted for participating in torture? So we will continue to call out the many U.S. officials, both elected and appointed, who are complicit in this travesty of justice.

My final salvo, as I was being led from the room by police, was, "You are a torturer!" I could not leave this elephant in the room unacknowledged. This truth did not matter to the high government officials in the room. The torturer being interviewed by the esteemed Senators ultimately said all the right things and was promoted to head the CIA. But this won't stop some citizens from speaking truth to power.

[Link to essay](#)

Please consider a donation to help fund our annual Fast for Justice this January. We are completely volunteer driven and run. We have no paid staff; all of the money you donate goes to funding the work we do together. We are fiscally sponsored by the Washington Peace Center.

The Washington Peace Center is a verified US-registered non profit. If you are able [click here to donate.](#)

Witness Against Torture formed in 2005 when 25 Americans went to Guantanamo Bay and attempted to visit the detention facility. They began to organize more broadly to shut down Guantanamo, end indefinite detention and torture and call out Islamophobia. During our demonstrations, we lift up the words of the detainees themselves, bringing them to public spaces they are not permitted to access. Witness Against Torture will carry on in its activities until torture is decisively ended, its victims are fully acknowledged, Guantanamo and similar facilities are closed, and those who ordered and committed torture are held to account.

www.witnessagainsttorture.com