

### Smarter, Not Harsher

Matthew Alexander

*It is a fundamental mistake to see the enemy as a set of targets. The enemy in war is a group of people. Some of them will have to be killed. Others will have to be captured or driven into hiding. The overwhelming majority, however, have to be persuaded.*

-- Frederick Kagan, "War and Aftermath"

TV shows like 24 incorporate interrogations and the use of torture under the "ticking bomb" scenario because it is dramatic and entertaining. The myriad of cop shows on TV (including NYPD Blue, CSI, Law & Order, and The Shield) consistently use harsh and forceful interrogation scenes to build excitement, it is a favorite topic of talking head political shows, and was a major topic in the recent presidential debates.

What's interesting to me is that the debate over torture in interrogations is morally important, but pragmatically irrelevant. Politicians and bureaucrats supporting the current administration have put in Herculean efforts to legalize harsh techniques, labeled "enhanced interrogation techniques," and to keep them classified. These methods are in complete contradiction to the standards that we expect our own troops, when captured, to be afforded and they are incompatible with American principles. Enhanced interrogation techniques are torture by the standards of the Geneva Conventions which we proclaim to uphold. What's most important, they are neither the most efficient nor reliable methods of achieving cooperation.

There are rare circumstances where force and threats would be more effective and timely than intellectual methods. In those rare circumstances, if we resort to torture in violation of the Geneva Conventions, the actual harm done to us is greater than any benefit that we could obtain. Abu Ghraib is the perfect example.

If the Abu Ghraib abuses had occurred in the process of obtaining critical intelligence information that would have prevented a major terrorist attack, it still would have had an overall negative impact in The Global War on Terrorism for the United States. Working side by side with the chief of interrogations for foreign fighters in Iraq, my duties included monitoring their interrogations for compliance and offering advice on interrogation strategies. The foreign fighters consistently cited Abu Ghraib as their number one reason for deciding to join the jihad. Abu Ghraib, and the torture that has occurred at Guantanamo Bay and in Afghanistan and Iraq, is Al Qai'da's best recruitment tool. Lest it is not obvious, the majority of the troops that we have

lost in Iraq have died at the hands of these foreign fighters, especially since it is the foreigners who are overwhelming used as suicide bombers.

Torture or inhumane treatment, even in isolated cases such as the case of Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, is not worth the price. The integrity of our country is more important than any single terrorist attack, even if it costs American lives. We must come to understand that the measure of our country is not in lives or resources; it is in the validity of our ideas of freedom, liberty, and justice. We cannot sacrifice those values, even to stop a terrorist attack. If we do, then we have allowed the Islamic extremists to achieve one of their major goals – to defeat the power of our ideas.

In interrogation, what's more important than the methods is our own intellectual ability to outsmart the enemy within the rules. We will win the war by being smarter, not harsher. By yielding to harsh techniques we are displaying our lack of confidence in our ability to defeat the enemy on an intellectual level.

In Iraq, a small group of us abandoned the Army mentality of approaching interrogations as a force-on-force exercise using controlling techniques, which involved harsh methods. We had no time to act pseudo-tough. Instead, we viewed interrogations as an opportunity for compromise and negotiation. We listened and showed compassion, used cultural awareness, and we took the time to understand our detainee's motivations and then created appropriate incentives. We applied our intellect to outsmart our enemies. And finally, we learned to take risks, specifically, to form friendships with our enemies. Lest anyone accuse me of being soft on the enemy, I recommend you review suicide bombing statistics during the spring and summer of 2006 in Iraq. You'll see the devastating effects these methods had on Al Qai'da operations, not to mention that they led to the death of Abu Musab Al Zarqawi, that elusive Preacher of Hate and former leader of Al Qai'da in Iraq (great credit, of course, goes to the soldiers who carried out the missions based on the intelligence we developed).

Our enemies in The War on Terrorism are smart and prepared. They understand traditional interrogation techniques. It is time for the advancement of our methods of interrogation. We must be smarter, more effective, and more humane in our treatment of prisoners. We need to improve our interrogation capability to prevent future terrorist attacks. In essence, we must work smarter, not harsher.

*Matthew Alexander spent fourteen years in the U.S. Air Force. An "investigator turned interrogator" deployed to Iraq in 2006, he conducted more than 300 interrogations and supervised more than 1,000. Alexander was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for his achievements in locating Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the leader of Al Qaida in Iraq, who was killed by Coalition Forces. He is the author of [How to Break a Terrorist: The U.S. Interrogators Who Used Brains, Not Brutality, to Take Down the Deadliest Man in Iraq.](#)*

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