

Human Rights - Torture

Torture does not work, as history



By Robert Fisk

Who said 'waterboarding' was new? The Americans are just apeing their predecessors in the inquisition

YET only a few days ago, I came across a medieval print in which a prisoner has been strapped to a wooden chair, a leather hosepipe pushed down his throat and a primitive pump fitted at the top of the hose where an ill-clad torturer is hard at work squirting water down the hose. The prisoner's eyes bulge with terror as he feels himself drowning, all the while watched by Spanish inquisitors who betray not the slightest feelings of sympathy with the prisoner. Who said "waterboarding" was new? The Americans are just apeing their predecessors in the inquisition.

Another medieval print I found in a Canadian newspaper in November shows a prisoner under interrogation in what I suspect is medieval Germany. In this case, he has been strapped backwards to the outer edge of a wheel.

Two hooded men are administering his agony. One is using a bellows to encourage a fire burning at the bottom of the wheel while the other is turning the wheel forwards so that the prisoner's feet are moving into the flames. The eyes of this poor man - naked save for a cloth over his lower torso - are tight shut in pain. Two priests stand beside him, one cowed, the other wearing a robe over his surplice, a paper and pen in

the CIA's interrogation officers - and witnessed by officials who made no pretence that this was anything other than torture; no talk of "enhanced interrogation" from the lads who turned the wheel to the fire.

As Grafton recounts, "The pioneering medievalist Henry Charles Lea ... wrote at length about the ways in which inquisitors had used torture to make prisoners confess heretical views

ultimate punishment before death. Men who were to be "hanged, drawn and quartered" in medieval London, for example, would be shown the "instruments" before their final suffering began with the withdrawal of their intestines in front of vast crowds of onlookers. Most of those tortured for information in medieval times were

had represented and the power of those who inflicted such pain upon them. No destroying of videotapes here. Illustrated pamphlets and songs, according to Grafton, were added to the repertory of publicty.

Ronnie Po-chia Hsia and Italian scholars Diego Quaglioni and Anna Esposito have studied the 15th-century Trent inquisition whose victims were usually Jews. In 1475, three Jewish

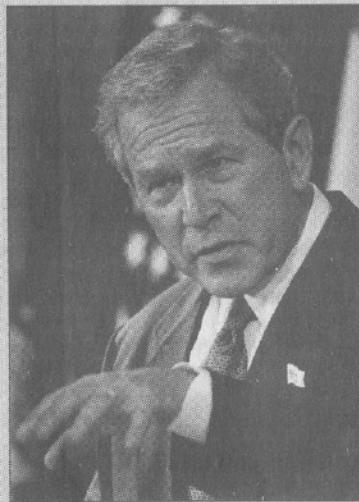
Anthony Grafton says that in the 16th and 17th centuries, torture was systematically used against anyone suspected of witchcraft, his or her statements taken down by sworn notaries — the equivalent, I suppose, of the CIA's interrogation officers — and witnessed by officials who made no pretence that this was anything other than torture

hand to take down the prisoner's words.

Anthony Grafton, who has been working on a book about magic in Renaissance Europe, says that in the 16th and 17th centuries, torture was systematically used against anyone suspected of witchcraft, his or her statements taken down by sworn notaries - the equivalent, I suppose, of

and actions. An enlightened man writing in what he saw as an enlightened age, he looked back in horror at these barbarous practices and condemned them with a clarity that anyone reading public statements must now envy."

There were professionals in the Middle Ages who were trained to use pain as a method of enquiry as well as an



anyway executed after they had provided the necessary information to their interrogators. These inquisitions - with details of the torture that accompanied them - were published and disseminated widely so that the public should understand the threat that the prisoners

households were accused of murdering a Christian boy called Simon to carry out the supposed Passover "ritual" of using his blood to make "matzo" bread. This "blood libel" - it was, of course, a total falsity - is still, alas, believed in many parts of the Middle East although it is frightening to discover that the idea was well established in 15th century Europe.

Grafton's conclusion is that Torture does not obtain what the torturer wants. Why? Men under the CIA's 'waterboarding' do not confess that they are guilty of being a devil. And who knows what they end up believing?

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As usual, the podestà - a city official - was the interrogator, who regarded external evidence as providing mere clues of guilt. Europe was then still governed by Roman law which required confessions in order to convict. As Grafton describes horrifyingly, once the prisoner's answers no longer satisfied the podestà, the torturer tied the man's or woman's arms behind their back and the prisoner would then be lifted by a pulley,

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agonisingly, towards the ceiling. "Then, on orders of the podestà, the torturer would make the accused 'jump' or 'dance' - pulling him or her up, then releasing the rope, dislocating limbs and inflicting stunning pain."

When a member of one of the Trent Jewish families, Samuel, asked the podestà where he had heard that Jews

needed Christian blood, the interrogator replied - and all this while, it should be remembered, Samuel was dangling in the air on the pulley - that he had heard it from other Jews. Samuel said that he was being tortured unjustly. "The truth, the truth!" the podestà shouted, and Samuel was made to "jump" up to eight feet, telling his interrogator: "God the Helper and truth help me." After 40 minutes, he was returned to prison.

Once broken, the Jewish prisoners, of course, confessed. After another torture session, Samuel named a fellow Jew. Further sessions of torture finally broke him and he invented the Jewish ritual murder plot and named others guilty of this non-existent crime. Two tortured women managed to exonerate children but eventually, in Grafton's words, "they implicated loved ones, friends and members of other Jewish communities". Thus did torture force innocent civilians to confess to fantastical crimes. Oxford historian Lyndal Roper found that the tortured eventually accepted the view that they were guilty.

Grafton's conclusion is unanswerable. Torture does not obtain truth. It will make most ordinary people say anything the torturer wants. Why, who knows if the men under the CIA's "waterboarding" did not confess that they could fly to meet the devil. And who knows if the CIA did not end up believing him.

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