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The American inquisition?

Joan Chittister | Oct. 19, 2007 From Where I Stand

There are some things that being born in the United States simply does not prepare a person to imagine. One of them is a headline on the front page of a local newspaper reporting a "debate" going on in Congress on the use of torture as a part of U.S. military policy. A debate? What's to debate about it? Unless, of course you, were working for the court of Philip IV in 14th century France.

But, no, it's here now. In the United States. In our generation. In fact, they're now making movies about it.

This column, be assured, is not a film review. Others closer to the industry will do that very well once the film is released Oct. 19. But film quality is not the issue at hand. Content is the problem.

"Rendition" is a film dealing with the newly refined U.S. practice of outsourcing U.S. military prisoners to other countries for incarceration and "questioning." (I use the word loosely.) "Enhanced questioning," the President calls it. "Torture," the rest of the world is calling it.

That such a thing can happen here, by us, with little public response to it, is almost impossible to believe if you grew up bathed in the honor, integrity and high moral ground of this country. In fact, to say otherwise -- to say almost anything about maintaining traditional national standards -- is to be accused of "blaming America first." So much for "removing the speck in your neighbor's eye and ignoring the log in your own." Let alone "freedom and justice for all." But what a log it is. And what an injustice it can create. Which makes you wonder who are the real conservatives here.

The most startling public awareness of U.S. torture came in 2006. But not in this country. Oh, no. Instead, the British Broadcasting Corporation released a documentary in London detailing the work of plane spotters from one end of Europe to the other who had traced the routes of secret U.S. aircraft involved in the transport of "disappeared' detainees to clandestine prisons. The sites ranged from Eastern European countries to Egypt, Syria and Yemen. And all of it with the support and collaboration of European countries that simply looked the other way as the U.S. crossed their airspace hauling men taken in a "sweep," meaning without clear cause to do it, to secret, unknown prisons for what Washington later called "aggressive interrogation." "This can't be true," I thought, as I watched the methodical detailing of British investigative journalism. "We wouldn't do such a thing."

But Amnesty International had also been gathering information on the process. April 6, 2006, AI published its damning and definitive report titled Below the radar: Secret flights to torture and 'disappearance.' [1]

The article detailed with chilling specificity the systematic breaking down of human beings to gain information that they did --- or didn't have.

So, I give up, tell me again: What's the debate about?

The government says it's about "keeping the American people safe." But from what? From decency, from humanity, from morality, from law? Because by now, the stories of official U.S. atrocities are pouring out from all over the world. Just surf over to this page, www.thegully.com/essays/torture/torture2.html [2], skim the headlines. Surely that ought to be enough to tell us that we are up to our necks in tactics too close to sadism to overlook. Tactics that break the minds of innocents and decay the soul of those who call themselves victors.

But forget the morality question in an era when annihilation is a tactic on tap. What can we possibly hope for in human standards in an age when destruction of the globe is one possible option. And anyway, it's for a good cause, isn't it? After all, the very phrase, "the war on terror," is a magic phrase. It justifies anything we do, doesn't it? Peccadillos all, I'm sure, as long as we're the ones who are doing them.

For those with enough conscience left to question the project, however, maybe it wouldn't hurt to look instead at another news story from Oct. 13, 2007.

This story (Vatican to tell true knights' tale [3]) records that the Vatican has just recently published secret documents about the inquisition and heresy trial of the Knights Templar in 1307. Pope Clement V, it seems, initially absolved the medieval religious order of heresy. But under pressure from King Philip IV of France, who saw the wealth of the Knights as a threat to his kingdom, Clement suppressed the order. Then Philip used the accusations to arrest the leaders of the order and extract, under torture, confessions of heresy that justified Philip's seizing of their property.

Now what's to regret? It was a good cause, after all. No doubt King Philip was "saving the church" as well as "saving his country." Just as we are. The confessions he got under torture, unfortunately, belied the findings of the trial. But they did, conveniently, even if wrong, give the king a way to seize the riches of the order.

I'm sure the Vatican was sorry about it all.

But therein lies the lesson: Material gained under torture is simply not credible, a conclusion reached by Eyemeric, the Grand Inquisitor of Aragon himself in 1357, who said, information gained under torture "is deceptive and ineffectual." Which means that the torturer isn't credible either. Or, to put it another way, how can we ever hope to stop the school shootings and gang warfare we abhor while we're doing it ourselves? How do we tell our children that their violence is bad but our violence is good?

From where I stand, torture is too unreliable an item to build the morality, the credibility, the integrity of a church -- or a nation -- on it. After all, we can't have it both ways. Either the Inquisition was good -- or it wasn't.

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