

Western States Legal Foundation

Commentary

May 2009

Deterrence, Torture, Power

By Andrew Lichterman*

“If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about answers.”
Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*

The headlines tell us that President Obama is committed to working towards a nuclear weapons-free world. As is always the case in such matters, we would do well to look at the fine print. We should not expect that the United States, or any other country, will give up its nuclear weapons anytime soon. “This goal,” Obama tells us, “will not be reached quickly - perhaps not in my lifetime.” Further, he says, so long as nuclear weapons exist, the United States will maintain an “effective arsenal to deter any adversary.” In this, the justification for nuclear weapons remains the same: the elites of every nuclear-armed country always have insisted that nuclear weapons are only for “deterrence.” With enough nuclear weapons still in existence to destroy civilization and to damage irreparably all life on earth, its time to take a closer look at “deterrence.”

In significant ways, the discourse of nuclear “deterrence” resembles the discourse of torture. We can understand this parallel better if we substitute the term “enhanced interrogation techniques” for “torture,” as the Bush regime attempted to do (with some success, as manifested in widespread use of the term, often without criticism, in the mainstream news media).

The difference is that the success of those in power at placing the notion of “deterrence” at the core of nuclear weapons discourse has been far greater than the Bush regime’s effort to place the notion of “enhanced interrogation” at the center of discourse about torture. This is likely so because torture has existed for a very long time across a vast range of human experience, and hence is a well-known and relatively well-understood horror—opaque only to those in populations that have not in living memory been on the receiving end of it. Nuclear weapons, on the other hand, still are a new part of the collective human story, and were created and remain closeted still within powerful, secretive, institutions. Hence their perceived character and meaning have been subject to playful manipulation from the very moment of their creation. Elite efforts to define nuclear weapons— and to limit permissible meanings we may give to them— have been so successful that we have no easily available alternative to “deterrence.” We don’t even have our own word for the permanent presence of nuclear weapons in our lives.

So we must first solve the equation: “enhanced interrogation techniques” is to “torture” as “deterrence” is to “_____.” The horrors of nuclear weapons use are so great that it is hard to come up with an appropriate phrase. Constant threat of genocide and ecocide? (too clinical, lacks the deep reference in the concretely rooted collective imaginary of “torture”). “Hell on

earth?” (Too abstract and theological, also completely omits the element of human intention that is at the core of whatever the permanent, constant brandishing of nuclear weapons by largely unaccountable elites for decades on end really means).

We can find our starting point, perhaps, in clues that suggest my analogy is appropriate. The intention of the Bush regime’s rhetorical move— calling torture “enhanced interrogation”— was to encapsulate the justification for an inherently awful, degrading, and unjustifiable practice in its new name. If this “move” is successful, then the *purpose*, the intention, behind torture will simply be assumed, rather than discussed. The “purpose” of “enhanced interrogation” obviously is to “obtain information.” Once this is accepted, the metaphorical battle is quite nearly won. And if the “information” to be obtained can be portrayed as essential to “national security” (another self-justifying phrase in great need of disaggregating), the battle is virtually over.

So too with “deterrence.” The word itself presumes not attack, but defense. It is implicitly passive, unless one linguistically and politically disaggregates it to reveal its terrorist roots. And if one accepts that the purpose of nuclear weapons is only to defend against attack, the purposes of nuclear weapons (and the intentions of those who control them) are already assumed, and assumed to be in the general interest of the nation-state that “possesses” the nuclear weapons. The only question left is whether deterrence “works,” and actually makes a country or the world (again assuming without scrutiny or debate that everyone has the same interests) “safer.” Here too, if this rhetorical move is successful, the argument is nearly over, and readily subject to pacification (another neologism whose real meaning is its opposite) via traditional rhetorical moves and tools of the powerful: deployment of legions of experts claiming privileged access to knowledges too complex and obscure for ordinary folk to understand and to secret “information,” and if necessary attacks on the “patriotism” of any who nonetheless persist in raising questions.

There are other parallels between the discourses of torture and constant- nuclear-weapons-threat (my clunky temporary stand-in for “deterrence”). Both abound with— and place at the center of popular discourse justifying these practices— empirically unlikely, even fantastic, narratives of existential threat, and protection against it by selfless (if secretive) public servants (yet another self-justifying phrase). For torture, there is the captured terrorist who has hidden the ticking time bomb, for nuclear weapons, there is the ever-present possibility of a bolt from the blue nuclear attack. And today, these two narratives converge: the ticking time bomb is nuclear, and anyone who would oppose our nuclear weapons with their own presumptively is a terrorist— and might give them a bomb. Actual, everyday uses of torture and constant-nuclear-weapons-threat— to intimidate and silence entire populations, to provide what American generals call the ultimate ‘top cover’ backing world-wide wars of aggression to sustain a global empire— remain largely unmentionable in a discourse where “reasonable” experts and politicians talk of “enhanced interrogation” and “deterrence.”

And even the central—and continuing—confrontation among nuclear-armed states is misrepresented in an increasingly dangerous and contradictory kind of circular reasoning unconsciously engaged in even by many advocates of nuclear disarmament. The possibility of wars among the most powerful states—the kind of wars that in modern times have been

precipitated by the kind of broad, complex, economic and political crisis that we face again today—are treated as extremely unlikely, largely because most policy experts believe at some level that “deterrence works.” And yet we have not faced a moment in which the fundamental drivers of conflict among the most powerful states have been present—competition over key resources, intensifying political tension within states over wealth distribution, and general collapse of a prevailing “normal” order of international economic and political relationships—since before the dawn of the nuclear age. Wars among “great powers” are presumed to be largely obsolete --but this assumption is due in large part to a belief in deterrence rooted in the particular geopolitical conditions and experience of a Cold War nuclear confrontation rooted largely in ideology and the existence of the weapons themselves. The dangers presented by thousands of nuclear weapons in the hands of “great powers” thus are implicitly discounted, and most in the “arms control and disarmament community” remain comfortable talking about plans for nuclear disarmament in which truly meaningful progress—reduction to global nuclear weapons numbers below civilization-destroying numbers—is largely aspirational, a hazy distant goal many years, or even decades, in the future.

The result is that dominant opinion among experts and political leaders generates policy debate that viewed with even a smidgen of historical perspective appears increasingly absurd—and absurdly dangerous. President Obama’s White House web site tells us that “the gravest danger to the American people is the threat of a terrorist attack with a nuclear weapon and the spread of nuclear weapons to dangerous regimes.” “The Agenda: Foreign Policy,” http://www.whitehouse.gov/agenda/foreign_policy, accessed March 25, 2009. In this view, nuclear weapons that don’t yet exist are more dangerous than the thousands that already are in the hands of elites who *today* face growing threats to their hold on power—concrete social conflicts that also are euphemized myriad ways, from “global instability” to “populist anger” —unseen for a generation.

The hand that controls nuclear weapons is no different from the hand the tortures. The hood of the torturer and of those who threaten us all with death by nuclear annihilation must be removed, their true faces revealed. The legal historian Robert Cover wrote that “The torturer and victim do end up creating their own terrible 'world,' but this world derives its meaning from being imposed upon the ashes of another. The logic of that world is complete domination, though the objective may never be realized.” Robert Cover, “Violence and the Word,” (1986) 95 Yale L.J. 1601,1603 The practice of constant-nuclear-weapons-threat carries this logic to its existential, its apocalyptic, limit, a world in which those who strive to wield absolute power impose their will by threatening to reduce the world of all who stand in their way to literal, rather than metaphorical, ashes. This will to absolute power is the abiding purpose of those who wield both torture and nuclear weapons. Both torture and nuclear threat are intended to emphasize through terror that transcends all reason that the victim—or potential victim-- is utterly vulnerable, and that the hand that wields the power of ultimate violence is not, is invulnerable, all powerful. The intention— and the effect— is to sustain a world in which most are powerless but some hold great power, most are poor but a few hold great wealth, most are vulnerable but a few can at least convince themselves that for the duration of their time here on earth they are not.

It is a story that those who wield this power tell us is as old as human history— implying as well that it will be with us always, that it is our inescapable fate. Insisting upon the eternal presence of boundless violence in that way only obscures the immense scale and reach of the particular horrors of our chosen modernity. “But even if things have always been so,” Theodor Adorno observed, “although neither Timur nor Genghis Khan nor the English colonial administration in India systematically burst the lungs of millions of people with gas, the eternity of horror nevertheless manifests itself in the fact that each of its forms outdoes the old.” Adorno concludes that “He who relinquishes awareness of the growth of horror not merely succumbs to cold-hearted contemplation but fails to perceive, together with the specific difference between the newest and that preceding it, the true identity of the whole, of terror without end.” Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, E.F.N. Jephcott, trans. (London: NLB, 1974) pp.234-235.

Adorno wrote in the wake of a cataclysmic global war, with the age of nuclear weapons just beginning, and a world of constant-nuclear-threat still in the future. What has become clear is that humanity can not long survive a global order of things in which “terror without end” lies at the center of power, with those who rule most of us in most places still deploying limitless violence to keep things as they are. The conditions for another global cataclysm are quickening. Our technologies have brought us to the point where we can destroy ourselves and much of the chain of life that sustains us either quickly with nuclear weapons, or slowly simply by staying on the course that those in power insist upon, and insist on “defending” with a spectrum of violence that extends from the midnight knock on the door through the torture chambers to the incineration of cities, lands, and peoples. Even Martin Luther King’s call for “nonviolence or nonexistence” no longer is enough, now it also must be democracy or nonexistence, a full and final recognition of our collective vulnerability and our interdependence, one world, with every voice heard equally, or none.

**Andrew Lichterman lives in the San Francisco Bay Area and has worked for disarmament in various capacities for decades. He is a member of the board of the Oakland, California-based Western States Legal Foundation.*