

Psychologists in the firing line

In sanctioning the Bush Administration's use of torture, the corruption of American attorneys is common knowledge – but are academic psychologists also partly to blame? A book published this summer, *The Dark Side*, by *New Yorker* reporter Jane Mayer, finds fault with one of the discipline's most distinguished academics.

At issue is a three-hour speech given by Martin E. P. Seligman, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, at the San Diego Naval Base in the spring of 2002. Professor Seligman, former president of the American Psychological Association (APA), explained his famous theory of “learned helplessness” to an audience sponsored by a secret government training programme called Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape (SERE). He said he told the audience, which included CIA agents, “how American troops and American personnel could use what is known about learned helplessness and related findings to resist torture and evade successful interrogation by their captors”.

Mayer says the lecture in fact taught two SERE psychologists in the audience how to use “learned helplessness” in torturing al-Qaeda's Abu Zubayda, who had been seized in Pakistan just weeks before Professor Seligman spoke in San Diego. Zubayda was “renditioned” to Thailand, then to the Guantanamo prison camp, where the two psychologists working under contract to the CIA locked him in a dog crate. Mayer reports the interrogation degenerating as FBI agents, who were concerned not to violate American laws against torture, lost authority to the CIA's psychologists, who evinced no such scruples. Zubayda's treatment set the pattern for all later detainees – so-called.

Is Professor Seligman culpable in the Administration's war crimes? Defending the

lecture, he told the US website Inside Higher Ed, “all Americans must be prepared to help our nation in a time of need”. He added that “scientists need to be vigilant for illegal misuse of their work. I was vigilant then and would be vigilant now.”

Mayer scoffs at this protestation of innocence: “I personally feel that the medical and psychological professionals who have used their skills to further a programme designed to cause pain and suffering should be a high priority in terms of accountability,” she told *Harper's Magazine*.

Where the stress settles in the APA is not clear. Demonstrators gathered outside its Boston convention last month. Inside, a group calling itself Psychologists for an Ethical APA successfully petitioned for a mail ballot on a resolution that would ban members from assisting with coercive interrogation. The results are due any day now.

Meanwhile, the dog cage is the clue to ponder. Professor Seligman discovered “learned helplessness” in the 1960s by administering electric shocks to captive dogs. He used three methods to test their responses. The set of dogs that he shocked at random – the group to which he denied a response that could cause the pain to stop – fell into chronic depression.

To move from Professor Seligman's experiment to the CIA's treatment of Zubayda requires the ability to venture two equivalences: the first between dogs and humans, the second between resisting torture and inflicting it.

Professor Seligman has made his career on the first, proposing “learned helplessness” as a treatment for human depression. If his ostensible refusal to make the second sounds a little phoney, that is because he has, in fact, already made it. He tortured the dogs.

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