

ready to use torture

Practice employed in war can end up in your neighborhood

By Darius Rejali

The trial of former Chicago police Cmdr. Jon Burge is the current headline of an old story. For decades, Burge allegedly coerced false confessions to crimes from American citizens. Burge's alleged crimes follow on parallel tracks with the torture debates of the George W. Bush years. The connection may not be obvious to pro-torture pundits, but American soldiers who practice torture in the name of national security come home and implement those same techniques in civilian policing jobs in the name of public safety.

There is evidence Burge learned how to torture while serving in Vietnam. This dark cycle extends at least to 1905, when American soldiers brought the technique we now call waterboarding back from fighting insurgents in the Philippines. The tactics eventually found their way stateside as the soldiers returned.

In fact, waterboarding became so prevalent in domestic policing that by 1931, lawyers for the American Bar Association documented numerous instances throughout the United States, especially in the South, where it was said to be a "torture well known to bench and bar of the country." As recently as 1983, Sheriff James Parker and three of his deputies were convicted for repeatedly handcuffing and waterboarding prisoners to coerce confessions in San Jacinto County, Texas.

Not surprisingly, Americans continued using waterboarding during times of war. On Jan. 21, 1968, *The Washington Post* ran a picture of a member of the 1st Air Cavalry Division "pinning a Vietnamese to the ground while two other Vietnamese placed a towel over his face and poured water into his nose." The American soldier was court-martialed on Feb. 28, 1968. He was not the only American soldier documented using waterboarding on a detained prisoner. The CIA and other soldiers used the same technique in Iraq and Afghanistan as was used in the Philippines, Vietnam and San Jacinto County. The Bush-era torturers are simply carrying on an old and sad tradition.

Likewise, Jon Burge didn't invent magneto torture, i.e. applying shocks with a portable generator. Although Burge denied it, he may have become familiar with magneto torture while serving in Vietnam. According to the People's Law Office, Burge later used this technique. Magneto and waterboarding are known as "clean torture" because they don't leave incriminating marks.

U.S. Marines pioneered magneto torture in 1916 during the occupation of Haiti. The French introduced it to Vietnam in 1931, and Americans used it there from 1963 until 1975. Members of

Burge's 9th MP Company in Vietnam recall the use of this electrical torture, saying that they "would pretty much do anything as we didn't leave scars on people." Philip Wolever, an Army Ranger who served in 1969 as executive officer of the 9th MP Company, also recalls seeing it, remarking, "If somebody was just shooting at you, you'd want information."

Most soldiers or police who torture aren't sadists; they get recruited into a subculture that dehumanizes their enemy in the name of a cause in which they believe. They endure hardship and pain, fight courageously, keep secrets, hold prevailing political beliefs, remain discreet and loyal. Later they take jobs as policemen or security guards and quietly pass on their techniques to their peers, creating torture subcultures.

Torturers resist pressure from politicians, keep pressure on members to keep secrets, and evade medical inspections that might expose torture. This ethos was epitomized in the soldiers

**There is no
such thing as
"controlled"
torture.**

of Task Force 6-26, an elite special operations unit that placed placards on their prison at Camp Nama in Iraq that read "NO BLOOD, NO FOUL." The slogan, as a Defense Department spokesman explained, reflected the

task force's adage, "if you don't make them bleed, they can't prosecute for it."

Torture has a well-known deprofessionalization effect on these police and military units. Groups that torture become increasingly undisciplined and brutal over time. This often forces out the true intelligence professional and creates a negative feedback loop that is difficult to stop. Torturers rapidly spin out of control; there is no such thing as "controlled" torture. As torturers get sloppy, they get caught. Bad publicity follows, and, some years later, there's a big trial.

The Burge trial is not "old news." From the cases we know in the U.S. and elsewhere, this much seems inescapable: Whenever a government looks the other way, or worse, authorizes torture in a foreign war, the same techniques take root in domestic policing sometime in the following 20 years.

That's what happened after soldiers waterboarded in the Philippine insurgency. And that's what happened with magneto torture in the Vietnam War. And it is likely the methods we use in our current wars will be coming soon to a neighborhood near you.

Darius Rejali, a professor of political science at Reed College, is author of the award-winning book "Torture and Democracy."

