

SCOTUS AND THE DESIGNATED STRIP SEARCH OBSERVERS

I spent most of yesterday digging through the PREAL document Jason Leopold and Jeff Kaye liberated the other day (more on that later). Like Harper's Scott Horton, reading it closely just after SCOTUS made it legal to strip search people arrested of offenses as minor as leash law violations made me see the Court's decision not as a legitimate means to keep jails safe, but as a way to make it easier to cow select classes of our population. Horton writes,

Just as the *Florence* decision was being prepared, the Department of Defense released a previously classified training manual used to prepare American pilots for resistance to foreign governments that might use illegal and immoral techniques to render them cooperative. Key in this manual are the precise practices highlighted in *Florence*. Body-cavity searches are performed, it explains, to make the prisoner "feel uncomfortable and degraded." Forced nudity and invasion of the body make the prisoner feel helpless, by removing all items that provide the prisoner with psychological support. In other words, the strip search is an essential step in efforts to destroy an individual's sense of self-confidence, well-being, and even his or her identity.

For me, it wasn't so much PREAL's description of strip searches themselves in the context of SERE training, with the manual's explicit statement that searches serve to humiliate, degrade, and erode identity. Rather, it was the job description for one designated role at the SERE fake jail, that of the "body cavity check (BCC)

observer.” The BCC observer’s sole role in the SERE training is to stare at prisoners during their intake strip search.

The role of this observer is to view the students while the BCC is being conducted. You do not conduct the actual BCC; the searchers will do this. You are there to observe and make the student feel uncomfortable and degraded. The observer will not have any verbal interaction with the student. Just act solemn and unimpressed.

Government psychologists have devised not just the strip searches themselves to degrade SERE trainees, they’ve ensured there will always be someone staring during the process (and while the PREAL contradicts itself on this and many topics, it calls for opposite sex observers).

Just act solemn and unimpressed and our cultural hangups about nudity will do the rest.

Remember, SERE is supposed to be a good thing. It trains our warriors to withstand the procedures our enemies use to break down their humanity if they’re captured. Except that we’ve rolled out the procedures not just for use against our own war captives, but for use in county jails across the country. SCOTUS just sanctioned the use of these intentionally dehumanizing procedures for the most minor violations of societal rules. (And don’t forget that—as Glenn Greenwald pointed out—the Obama Administration argued for strip searches as well.)

Now, all a local cop has to do to make a selected person feel the dependency wrought by humiliation is trump up some minor charge and whisk the (usually) young black male to the jail for a strip search. It won’t stop there, either. To justify this procedure, Kennedy points to three dangerous traffic stops, implicitly inviting invasive searches there, too.

We’ve long known these procedures of control are

about imposing dependency (the word PREAL uses).
But if there were any doubt, read how the
military creates a fictional space designed to
strip people of their humanity—compare it with
the world around us.