

# THE ABU ZUBAYDAH EXPERIMENT

The NYRB ~~New Yorker~~ has a piece with long excerpts from the leaked Red Cross report on American torture of high value detainees. (h/t scribe; corrected per scribe) Read it. It's chilling in its systematicity—the constant involvement of doctors, the efforts to hide any marks of torture, the invention of clinical language to describe torture.

I'll return to the report, but for the moment just one observation.

Amid a slew of details on the treatment of Abu Zubaydah, the article describes Abu Zubaydah learning that he was the guinea pig for these techniques.

We do not know if the plywood [to minimize the damage from slamming him against the wall] appeared in Zubaydah's white room thanks to orders from his interrogators, from their bosses at Langley, or perhaps from their superiors in the White House. We don't know the precise parts played by those responsible for "choreographing" the "alternative set of procedures." We do know from several reports that at a White House meeting in July 2002 top administration lawyers gave the CIA "the green light" to move to the "more aggressive techniques" that were applied to him, separately and in combination, during the following days:

After the beating I was then placed in the small box. They placed a cloth or cover over the box to cut out all light and restrict my air supply. As it was not high enough even to sit upright, I had to crouch down. It was very difficult because of

my wounds. The stress on my legs held in this position meant my wounds both in the leg and stomach became very painful. I think this occurred about 3 months after my last operation. It was always cold in the room, but when the cover was placed over the box it made it hot and sweaty inside. The wound on my leg began to open and started to bleed. I don't know how long I remained in the small box, I think I may have slept or maybe fainted.

I was then dragged from the small box, unable to walk properly and put on what looked like a hospital bed, and strapped down very tightly with belts. A black cloth was then placed over my face and the interrogators used a mineral water bottle to pour water on the cloth so that I could not breathe. After a few minutes the cloth was removed and the bed was rotated into an upright position. The pressure of the straps on my wounds was very painful. I vomited. The bed was then again lowered to horizontal position and the same torture carried out again with the black cloth over my face and water poured on from a bottle. On this occasion my head was in a more backward, downwards position and the water was poured on for a longer time. I struggled against the straps, trying to breathe, but it was hopeless. I thought I was going to die. I lost control of my urine. Since then I still lose control of my urine when under stress.

I was then placed again in the tall box. While I was inside the box loud music was played again and somebody kept banging repeatedly on the box from the outside. I tried to sit down on the floor, but because of the small space the bucket with urine tipped over and spilt over me.... I was then taken out and again a towel was wrapped around my neck and I was smashed into the wall with the plywood covering and repeatedly slapped in the face by the same two interrogators as before.

I was then made to sit on the floor with a black hood over my head until the next session of torture began. The room was always kept very cold.

This went on for approximately one week. During this time the whole procedure was repeated five times. On each occasion, apart from one, I was suffocated once or twice and was put in the vertical position on the bed in between. On one occasion the suffocation was repeated three times. I vomited each time I was put in the vertical position between the suffocation.

During that week I was not given any solid food. I was only given Ensure to drink. My head and beard were shaved everyday.

I collapsed and lost consciousness on several occasions. Eventually the torture was stopped by the intervention of the doctor.

**I was told during this period**

that I was one of the first to receive these interrogation techniques, so no rules applied. It felt like they were experimenting and trying out techniques to be used later on other people.

## 5.

All evidence from the ICRC report suggests that **Abu Zubaydah's informant was telling him the truth: he was the first, and, as such, a guinea pig.** Some techniques are discarded. The coffin-like black boxes, for example, barely large enough to contain a man, one six feet tall and the other scarcely more than three feet, which seem to recall the sensory-deprivation tanks used in early CIA-sponsored experiments, do not reappear. Neither does the "long-time sitting"—the weeks shackled to a chair—that Abu Zubaydah endured in his first few months. [my emphasis]

This article makes clear, then, that about two and a half months after he first woke up in US custody—so probably shortly after mid-June 2002—the US was experimenting on Abu Zubaydah, testing out various forms of torture to see which worked best and left the fewest marks.

Understand what this means: the torturers were conducting their experiments on Abu Zubaydah **before** John Yoo wrote up an OLC memo authorizing torture (hell—Yoo may have excluded those methods they had decided were ineffective and that may be why they told Abu Zubaydah there were no rules). The torturers were conducting their experiments with the intimate involvement of those back at the White House getting briefed and approving of each technique. And the torturers were being videotaped doing so.

Those tapes—which in this context sound like a

tool in their experimentation more than anything else—are the tapes that CIA destroyed in 2005.

Which I guess makes my question from a few weeks ago all the more pressing. Who watched these torture tapes?