

INTERVIEW

Making Torture American Again, With Help From Hollywood



Protesters call for the closing of the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in 2013. (Jacquelyn Martin / AP)

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Regardless of their take on the volatile topic of torture, there appears to be rare agreement among an array of experts, activists, proponents and critics about one of the most reliable ways it has been successfully defended in recent decades. The so-called ticking time bomb scenario has done the trick so often and so well—for leaders of countries, militaries, small armies of Hollywood producers—that it has taken on the enticing shine of a particularly hot political commodity: the foregone conclusion disguised as a given.

The scenario lays out the premise that if a man-made catastrophe were about to take place and the criminal mastermind behind it had been captured, torture would suddenly become not only a prudent option but a moral obligation. The naïve and precious idealism of deluded liberal elites would give way to tough-guy pragmatism, considering how countless lives could be spared by what would be, in less extreme circumstances, the highly abhorrent and unethical treatment of an isolated person or group. As anyone who has seen *24*, any of Liam Neeson’s alpha-dad-on-a-rampage movies, or [this 2001 Dick Cheney interview knows](#), ours is a mean world, and sometimes you need to cross over to the dark side to protect the ones you love.

There are just a few problems with this argument, to say the least. Author and scholar Alex Adams confidently takes a jackhammer to a series of key premises on which it rests in his new book, *How to Justify Torture: Inside the Ticking Bomb Scenario*, beginning with the one that claims torture

works, like it or not. For a quick refresher, here's a clip of former Vice President Cheney, still insisting on its efficacy in this 2014 episode of "Meet the Press," although he also insists on using the term "enhanced interrogation" instead of torture when it comes to the United States' post-9/11 tactics:



NBC News: Dick Cheney Would Torture Again

<https://youtu.be/l-Qi8srR7co>

Those visiting the Washington, D.C., area can now pop by the [International Spy Museum](#) to weigh in on what they think torture is and to see artifacts from the Bush-Cheney era, such as this waterboarding kit:



(Jacquelyn Martin / AP)

Adams is clear on these distinctions, and he also has a firm grip on how the ticking time bomb scenario has had a good amount of help in the justification department from Hollywood. From *Dirty Harry* to *Batman Begins*, *24*'s Jack Bauer to French cinema, Adams' book tracks the pop-cultural narratives around torture that have functioned, intentionally or no, to make the practice acceptable in the eyes of the global public.

Here it should be noted that there reportedly was also a torture scene in the recent children's feature *Pokémon: Detective Pikachu*. (We thought we knew you, Pikachu.)

As Adams pointed out in a recent interview with Truthdig Executive Editor Kasia Anderson, the pleasure we take in consuming entertainment is important in the normalization process. Torture lurks in the realm of the taboo, which is always good for a thrill. Hollywood producers like thrills, as do audiences. It's no mystery how and why the theme continues to play out on screens of all sizes.

Not too long ago, talking about how politics and entertainment are intertwined used to be harder to do, especially before the election of a certain reality TV star to the world's most powerful office. Now, though some pointed sniffs may still echo through certain vaunted halls of The Academy when the notion is raised of taking entertainment seriously as a source of political inquiry, it seems more apparent, the stakes far more drastic than even subscribers to that idea had imagined. Adams knows, as he elaborates in the interview below, that though it's not so simple as to say *Dirty Harry* made a Dick Cheney or a Donald Trump possible, there are connections that we ignore at our peril.

KASIA ANDERSON: What, in your estimation, is the relationship between torture on the part of a state against its enemies and how the government of that state treats its citizens?

ALEX ADAMS: This is a complex and interesting question. One of the ways that the U.S., for instance, has justified its torture regime in Guantanamo and the network of CIA black sites is the reclassification of the people it incarcerates at these sites as “detainees” and “enemy combatants” rather than prisoners. These categories are radical legal innovations, created solely in order to strip these prisoners of their availability to the protections of international law. Prisoners are subject to the Geneva Conventions, and the U.S. argues that detainees and enemy combatants are not. To be blunt, through these redefinitions the U.S. administration has created a class of “torturable” inmates. Now, to consider citizens: Citizens of a state are insulated against torture in part because citizenship itself is a body of protections that ensures the safety of the person holding that citizenship, those documents and that status; citizenship and noncombatant status protect us from the violence of war. However, once we are classified as a threat, or as a criminal, or, rather, as someone who it is in some way legitimate for the state to go after, then there is the potential for us to forfeit these protections and be subject to gross infringements of human rights. I'm sure your readers can join the dots here: Think about the state of incarceration in the U.S., which is characterized by slave labor and hideous conditions of confinement, or police brutality, and state surveillance of minority groups in the U.S. and Europe. That is, to sum up: We are all potentially torturable, and because of racism ingrained at all social and institutional levels, some of us are more torturable than others.

Wars, in particular colonial wars, are often laboratories of social control. In the U.S., for instance, there have been calls for white nationalist terrorists to be treated the same way as Muslim terrorists. What this would trigger, however, would be the use, on U.S. soil and against U.S. citizens, of counterterrorist practices that have been denounced across the globe as war crimes. So there's always the potential for the war to come home.

KA: Why—or maybe the question is how—do you think that there has been such a pronounced uptick in the post-9/11 era of instances of torture being depicted in entertainment and popular cultural products? It's not like there was a master memo that circulated through Hollywood.

AA: You're right that we can't attribute the rise in the prominence of torture representations to a centralized or deliberate plan. But looking back, we can make patterns from the chaos. There was

a general climate of outrage and revanchism, and one of the ways that this manifested was in the torture program, and in more general calls for torture, which were part of this general atmosphere. After 9/11, there was a lot of grief, a lot of rage, there were calls for invasion, calls for the use of nuclear weapons, calls for peace; one strand of this was the call for and the practice of torture. There have been an extraordinary amount of cultural explorations of the war on terror, of colonial violence and so on, characterized in a huge multitude of ways. What I've done in the book is isolate one element of this and charted its extraordinary development. It's also worth noting that there were—and are still—a lot of representations critiquing torture, exposing it and condemning it. The ticking bomb scenario is part of a wide and varied debate about torture, which is still taking place today. Amazon is releasing *The Report* soon, for instance, which I'm really looking forward to seeing.

I like your remark about the lack of a master memo, and, of course, you're right. But on the other hand, if we look at the controversy surrounding a movie like *Zero Dark Thirty*, for instance, we can see that the military [does] attempt to influence Hollywood storytelling for nakedly ideological purposes. It's difficult to articulate this point without sounding like a conspiracy theorist, but there are documented cases in which torture narratives have been literally ghostwritten by the CIA.

KA: I know this may not happen currently as much as it may have when you began your work, but what do you tell people who may discount the importance of entertainment and popular culture as “mere fluff,” or somehow separate from real life?

AA: You're right to note that the connection between popular culture and political discourse is easier to discuss these days, but there was a time when people would feel entitled to summarily dismiss concerns about the political nature of literature, film and popular culture. People in general are more amenable to the idea now, but it still needs to be stressed: The fact that something may be enjoyable or recreational in no way diminishes the extent to which politics are embedded into it. At the most fundamental level, stories are socializing tools which morally and philosophically educate or stimulate us; we accept this about children's fiction or about polemic art forms like caricature, so why shouldn't we accept it about fiction or literature or culture more generally?

There are some important caveats to this, of course. Sometimes people object to this position because it can sometimes be articulated in a patronizing manner; that is, that you mean that people are passively or stupidly brainwashed or indoctrinated by cultural discourse. Of course, that isn't accurate: Audiences don't have to accept anything they see uncritically, and I'm not just talking about people who have arts degrees. Any ordinary audience will be able to watch or read something critically; in general, most audiences today have a very sophisticated level of visual and cultural literacy. Something like the Marvel Cinematic Universe couldn't exist without the presumption that most ordinary consumers of visual media are able to handle huge amounts of aesthetic and affective and political material competently, adaptably and intelligently.

The other caveat here is the censorship angle: Sometimes people think that by objecting to something in a movie or a novel you are calling for it to be banned, or that you're saying that it is literally dangerous or toxic in a contaminating way. You see this in free speech debates, but also in the way that people sometimes blame movies and video games for sex murders or gun crime. Now, I think that the popular culture I critique in the book does circulate unsavory ideas that should be resisted, but I'm not calling for censorship or literally blaming the CIA torture program on *24*. The claim that culture is political is, for me, quite a simple claim: Parliaments, philosophy seminars and

talk shows aren't the only places where we have public debates about moral, ethical and political debates. Sometimes we have them in the cinema or on Netflix.

KA: Following on that last question, how would you characterize the unique qualities of popular culture and entertainment (I don't use these interchangeably, by the way, but am putting them together for the sake of brevity here) as ideological conduits? For example, it seems like popular culture and entertainment are effective sites for strengthening an argument, whether about torture or another topic, in part because they are not always consumed the same way more overtly political or "serious" texts are.

AA: Yes, I agree. One of the major reasons that popular culture is politically effective is that it is pleasurable, recreational. We are happy when the family is reunited, we enjoy seeing the villains come to a sticky end, we are inhabited by a sense of justice or outrage or horror (when the cultural objects are doing their job properly). The ways in which these pleasures are associated with particular narratives or events or characterizations does a great deal of work—strengthening or undermining stereotypes, for instance, or developing and renegotiating ideas of justice. I've written elsewhere about humor as a form of political communication, and I think it's a really strong example of what we're discussing here: When we laugh, we understand and we agree. This is a really effective, because personal, way of generating agreement, because seriousness is so often dry or boring or otherwise off-putting. So yes, I think that the pleasurable character of these forms of cultural discourse is central to why they're effective.

KA: What is the promotion and/or common sense-ification of torture about at this moment? Does it have a function now that differs from, say, how—and perhaps why—it was supported right after 9/11?

AA: You're right to draw this distinction. There was an extent to which the earliest post-9/11 torture narratives could be understood as a reaction to a particular moment, but now, 18 years on, there is something about the repetitive and normalized nature of these scenarios that suggests something else. The idea that torture is simply effective and righteous because it can save the day is embedded into multiple forms of cultural production—it's not just thrillers or action movies; torture is *everywhere*. I haven't seen it yet, but apparently there's a torture scene in *Pokémon Detective Pikachu*. So today I would say that the problem is more that we have a normalization, a banalization of torture. It's common sense—"If it was *my* daughter, of course I would torture someone to save her." I remember when people were warning that torture would become normalized. They were right.

KA: How would you read Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's recent praise of Colonel Carlos Alberto Ustra, as well as Donald Trump's campaign promises regarding bringing waterboarding back (and then some)?

AA: I would say that one of the distinguishing characteristics of fascists is their enthusiasm for appearing tough, their utter lack of understanding of what is at stake in torture, and their moronic cruelty.

I think, regarding Trump in particular. one of the interesting things about the way he would frame his remarks about torture is by positioning torture as "anti-PC." That says a lot about the way that he uses the language of the far right. Further, even though he's incoherent, it's dangerous to assume

that he doesn't know what he's doing. One of the major tactics of his fascism is to make everyone who is reasonable rush to provide coherent rebuttals to his ludicrous statements; while he's doing that, he's busily prosecuting his horrendous agenda. Sartre said it in *Anti-Semite and Jew*. The fascist knows he is not talking in good faith, but he laughs while he forces us to rebut ever more absurd allegations. Likewise, Bolsonaro will make some flippant remark, and while we're screaming about it he'll burn down the Amazon.

But at the same time, I think they mean it when they say things like that about torture. When a fascist tells you who he is, believe him the first time.