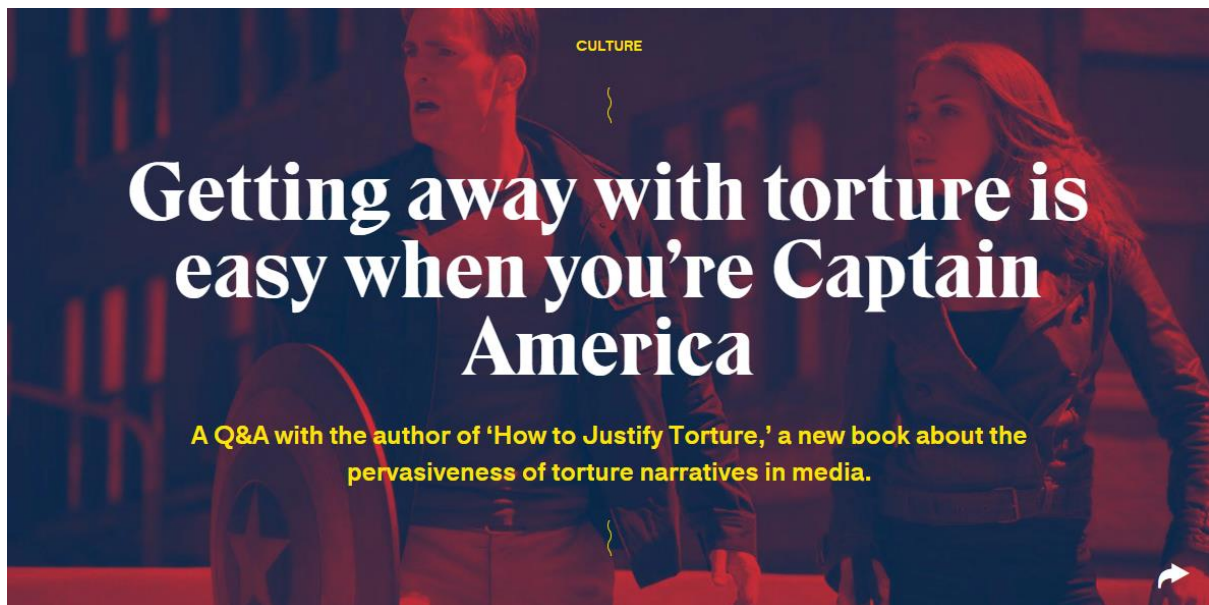INTERVIEW

Getting Away with Torture is Easy When You're Captain America


BY [Paola de Varona](#) PUBLISHED September 5, 2019
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In April, a majority conservative Supreme Court [overturned 60 years of precedent](#) around the death penalty by rejecting a death row inmate's petition for an alternative method of execution due to his debilitating medical condition. [Associate Justice Neil Gorsuch](#) himself wrote, "The Eighth Amendment does not guarantee a prisoner a painless death — something that, of course, isn't guaranteed to many people, including most victims of capital crimes." The ruling has been [largely decried](#) as the return of capital punishment, coming at a time when conservative governments and leaders across the world like [Trump](#) and [Jair Bolosano](#) have expressed their controversial support for the return of torture tactics.

Implicit support for this position is found constantly in the TV, films, and books we consume on a daily basis. From *Stranger Things* to *Taken*, underlying torture narratives exist in the background, and often at the forefront, of pop culture — something that cultural critic Alex Adams dives into with his new book *[How to Justify Torture](#)*, out September 10.

Exploring how contemporary culture creates increasingly simplistic narratives about good guy torturers and bad guy victims, Adams writes about the dangers of this rhetoric both politically and socially. The book largely concerns itself with the thought experiment of a ticking time bomb, a tactic often used to justify the use of torture in dire emergencies. The concept is familiar to anyone who's seen *24*: Say there's a bomb somewhere in the city and you've captured the terrorist. Would you torture them to get the information before the bomb detonates, potentially saving thousands of lives? Mass culture overwhelmingly conditions us to answer yes, when of course it's rarely so simple. The book is divided into three sections: the first examines utilitarian arguments in support of torture tactics; the second looks at the dark heroism and vigilante spirit present in films and movies like *Dirty Harry* and *Daredevil*; the final section explores torture as a parental and masculine responsibility of protecting the family.

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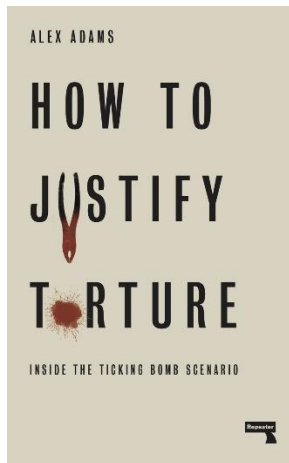
The Outline spoke with Adams about the weaknesses of the ticking bomb scenario, prominent examples of torture in popular films and TV shows, and the way toxic, traditional forms of masculinity reinforce the values behind committing torture.

The Outline: Can you plainly explain what the ticking bomb scenario is, for those unfamiliar with the concept?

Alex Adams: It's a question of: If there was a dire emergency, which could be an imminent terrorist attack, abduction or any imminent emergency, if there's an opportunity to inflict torture on somebody who is in some way responsible for that crisis and that would help you resolve that crisis would you do it? The way that it's framed you can't really say no to it. If there's a young girl gone missing, a nuclear missile gone missing, or if there's a bomb in a school, it's a very emotionally urgent situation, which overrides the rational element of the way people think about it.

Myself included — I don't think I've got some unique ability to resist those kinds of emotional persuasions. It's so powerful it makes you think, well, of course if it were my daughter I'd do it. There's all sorts of problems with that as a question because there's no way we could show the torture would actually do anything constructive or way we could be certain that it would help. It almost certainly would make the situation worse by adding an atrocity to the atrocity. It sets up this charged scenario and obliges you to only say yes to it because you couldn't say, no, I would let the little girl suffocate.

That's a shocking and morally inexcusable thing to say. It's completely unrealistic, but it sets up this emotionally compelling situation which tries to convince us that the absolute prohibitions that we have on torture in moral and ethical thinking and in international law don't apply in this one unique situation.

What are some easy ways to poke holes in the scenario?

One of the things that it wants us to imagine is that there's a terrifying situation which is very urgent and that we are completely taken by surprise by it. We're unprepared for it, but we're prepared enough to have caught the culprit and know for certain that if we were to do some torture on this guy he would tell us exactly what we need to resolve the emergency and wouldn't lie or misdirect us. Also, we'd have to be able to recognize the truth when he was speaking. For example, if there are three wells and we don't know which one the girl is down, but we torture him and he says that the girl is down well two, why should we believe him?

The idea is that torture makes people speak the truth in some way that's unique amongst other interrogation tactics, which simply is not the case. But also how have we caught the guy without finding out what he's done already? How have we missed any of his accomplices? In a surveillance society, how have we not just seen what well he put the girl down? There's lots of rhetorical questions that you can use to puncture it effectively. Elaine Scarry, who wrote *The Body in Pain*, says the thing that's really unconvincing about the ticking bomb scenario is the idea that knowledge in the world is very often imperfect and we have to guess and make our best approximation of what is likely to be the case. The ticking bomb scenario requires us to be

absolutely certain of lots of things, but paradoxically not the one thing that really matters i.e. where is the girl, where is the bomb, how do we stop the countdown?

Are there any examples that we might be surprised to find supports torture?

I looked at the Marvel movies and in one of the Captain America films there's a part where there's a mock execution. Captain America and Black Widow, they've got this guy from Hydra who they need to interrogate, so they throw him off the top of the building, then Falcon picks him up and plops him back on the top of the building. He's terrified because he's had this near death experience so he believes they really mean business and starts to spill the beans. But that's a mock execution. The thing that's really surprising about it for me is that Captain America is supposed to be the ultimate good guy, almost morally unimpeachable, and then while the guy is falling to, what he thinks is his death, Captain America and Black Widow are having this jokey conversation about how Captain America needs to get a girlfriend.

Another great example is *Stranger Things*. It's a fun supernatural show with dark elements, but it's about kids. And then in the last season, there's this really powerful torture scene where one of the characters threatens to chop someone's finger off with a cigar cutter and he gets what he wants out of that. There's this jarring torture scene in the middle of this essentially lighthearted show. So it's interesting how torture is integrated into, not just grim dark counterterrorism narratives, but also stuff that's got a lighthearted tone and is for a family audience.

Why is it that torture can be passed off in such a lighthearted way?

This normalization of torture has been progressing at a dramatic rate over the last 15 to 20 years. One of the things I've looked at in the book are a lot of thrillers and action movies before 9/11 in the '80s and '90s. In some of them it's only the bad guys who are torturers and it's really strongly underlying that the reason that they're evil is that they will commit torture against people. Sometimes the idea that 9/11 precipitated a torture culture can be a little bit overstated, but in broad terms there's some truth to it. After 9/11 we do see historically and politically the establishment of Guantanamo, and the beginning of what's now been revealed as the torture program, so to an extent popular culture serves this political function of normalizing military solutions.

When *24* started to have torture in it, for example, there were lots of people screaming about it saying this is bad. And now the most recent series of *24* had a couple of torture scenes and people were just like oh well, that's *24*, who cares. The public and political sphere has become so saturated with torture imagery that people find it normal to the extent that it's a joke. It mirrors the political situation on the ground. Ultimately, before 9/11 what was a fringe extreme dark military position now is a part of everyday discourse and in family movies. Because there's this rise of the right with Trump, Bolsonaro, Boris Johnson, and Modi in India, I do think the increasing presence of this ticking bomb argument is part of that ideological complex.

How does torture, as a militaristic and conservative law and order position, coexist with the vigilantism often at work in much of these films then?

There's a libertarian aspect in there where every man has to defend his own castle, plot of land, and family against invaders — usually his daughter and whatever kind of peril she may come

into. In the book I spend a lot of time talking about *Dirty Harry*, which is this old Clint Eastwood movie where there's a character who's simultaneously a cop and a vigilante. It's simultaneously both: On one hand, cops and the military should definitely be allowed to do unrestricted police work, but at the same time people should take the law into their own hands. That's contradictory, because then really the police should go after the vigilante.

At the same time there's this huge tradition in a lot of popular culture — you see this in Batman, for example, where Batman goes further than the cops could. He'll do things his way and the cops love it because they know they can't get away with it. But they know that's what needs to be done. There's definitely this enormous tradition in showing the law as somehow working on behalf of criminals, facilitating the abduction of kids and terrorism. So you need the vigilante to go and do what those narratives position as the right thing.

You bring up that a lot of this culture stems from traditional forms of masculinity, could you explain that a bit?

In terms of how the scenario is related to masculine ideas or what it means to be a man, I found less material on that. Of course, feminists and feminist material has talked a lot about destructive masculinity and hegemonic masculinity that thrive off of being able to commit violence. But it's not just this military idea; it's also this private idea that we as men are socialized to think it's our responsibility to protect people. Everybody is obliged to protect everybody else, that's not unique to men, but I think there is an element of masculine socialization.

Heterosexually speaking, the idea that to be a good tough normal heterosexual bloke, particularly a good father and a good husband, you have to be willing to commit violence on behalf of the family. That's one of the underplayed elements of that in the conversation at the moment, is the extent to which those ideas about gender and masculinity underpin so much of that poltiical discourse certainly about torture, militarism, and violence more generally.

It reminds me of the discourse around gun violence in the U.S. being linked to domestically abusive men, and toxic masculinity.

I hadn't thought of that while I was writing the book, but yeah, I think that's right. A lot of the things that these people are saying in their manifestos are using the rhetoric of protection, defense, and the vulnerable culture, the vulnerable white families. That's one of the elements of the ticking bomb scenario that's really slippery, promiscuous, and very adaptable: That idea that committing violence is somehow a masculine ideal.

What can be done to start changing the narrative in pop culture?

I remember reading an article about the state of literary studies, and it said that literary studies in its present form is inherently conservative because it's diagnostic rather than interventionist. There's a risk in writing this kind of book that you just describe what's happening rather than outlining a program on how to combat it. What I would like to think I have done with this book is give people a set of tools on how to respond to the ticking bomb scenario. I wanted to give people a way of saying, *well actually that's wrong, think about it from this perspective.*

But also we need different narratives. Because like I was saying before, before 9/11 there were tons of movies in which the villain was a torturer and that was why they were bad. It might be interesting if we could have movies, novels, TV series, and video games where the villains are torturers.

I've been working on a novel about this. One of my big questions has been how do I frame this kind of narrative without walking into its pitfalls? Because it's such an elastic and seductive way of talking about torture that it's tricky to fight back against. But there's got to be a way to do it.