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**Alfred W. McCoy**

## **Torture and Impunity: The U.S. Doctrine of Coercive Interrogation**

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# Book Reviews

ALFRED W. MCCOY

## **Torture and Impunity: The U.S. Doctrine of Coercive Interrogation**

Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012. 401 pages.

In *Torture and Impunity: The U.S. Doctrine of Coercive Interrogation* Alfred W. McCoy once more impresses the necessity of a critical reevaluation of the United States government's policies on the use of torture to address its security needs after 11 September 2001. The sequel to the author's *A Question of Torture* (2006), *Torture and Impunity* probes the historical involvement of the US government in the development and practice of torture from the Cold War to the present and the social cost of the utilization and institutionalization of torture. McCoy stresses that coercive investigation is not just ineffective and contrary to international laws and conventions on torture, but also creates a moral conundrum for American society, whose awareness of the inhumanity of torture clashes with its justification through the rhetoric of national security.

At a glance the work appears as a linear presentation of the historical narrative of US involvement in torture, starting from the participation of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in Cold War research and application of mind control, the revival of coercive methods during the War on Terror, to what McCoy calls the stage of impunity (6). But there are also several underlying themes in this book. McCoy analyzes the global impact of the US government's institutionalization and support of torture,

as it resulted in the use of torture by a number of its allied regimes and the perpetration of human rights violations beyond US borders. He also probes the sociopolitical costs of the US government's policies on torture and impunity, particularly the erosion of the moral authority of the US and the compromising of American social values and institutions.

The book begins with an overview of the US government's involvement in torture through the sixty-year history of the CIA. McCoy argues that, despite the substantial resources the US invested in torture research and its engagement with domestic and international stakeholders to legalize torture, the use of torture has proven ineffective in gathering crucial intelligence from torture victims. To illustrate this point, McCoy cites the case of Abu Zubaydah, an al-Qaeda leader captured in March 2002 and interrogated in a CIA black site in Thailand for intelligence gathering in connection with the War on Terror. Zubaydah was one of the few prisoners of the US who had the unique experience of being subjected to the conflicting interrogation methods of the CIA and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and his case resulted in a well-publicized debate between the FBI and CIA on the efficacy of aggressive interrogation. The CIA used "enhanced interrogation" methods, which consisted of psychological assaults and "waterboarding," but the agency did not obtain the desired information. In contrast, the FBI used empathetic interrogation and noncoercive interview methods and succeeded in obtaining "actionable" intelligence from Zubaydah, such as the roles played by key terror suspects (36–37).

McCoy also explores how US policies on torture compromised important institutions such as the scientific community and the mass media. Through various fronts and dummy corporations, the CIA covertly funded researches on drugs, pain, and behavioral control and influenced medical professionals and researchers to betray the Hippocratic oath by engaging in questionable and unethical researches on sensory deprivation, mind-influencing drugs, and infliction of pain. Government intrusion, however, went beyond utilizing science to perfect torture, for it enlisted psychologists to facilitate aggressive interrogation in detention sites such as Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. The US mass media played a crucial role as well in building the culture of impunity and desensitizing American citizens by presenting a highly erotic and seductive perception of torture, which intelligence officials had utilized to justify its use for national

security. Instead of serving as an independent democratic institution with a critical stance toward torture, the US media glorified the infliction of pain on perceived enemies of the state in the guise of protecting US citizens.

The media and the scientific community's support for torture, whether direct or indirect, cast a shadow on the integrity and ethics of both institutions. The media surrendered its role of being a vanguard of democratic rights, which are fundamental to American society, and became a platform for the social acceptance of torture. The scientific community now has to grapple with the fact that the knowledge it produced can be weaponized and used against innocent civilians.

The CIA research on torture and counterinsurgency also went beyond US borders as allied regimes applied the methodologies of the US government in their own locales. US-funded black sites were established in various parts of the world where coercive interrogation could be carried out freely without concern for US law. According to McCoy, the methods utilized during the War on Terror originated from various CIA programs on coercive intelligence such as the Phoenix Program, which was employed during the Vietnam War, and the Project X program of the 1960s. The US army utilized the same aggressive and coercive methods in Iraq, but modified them to attack not just the vulnerabilities of the human psyche but also the Iraqis' cultural sensitivities, as the sexually charged Abu Ghraib photographs revealed.

McCoy also argues that, despite the lack of results from coercive interrogation and the promise of the Obama administration to end US involvement in torture, the US has yet to make substantial gains in punishing past perpetrators and dismantling US torture sites throughout the world. Instead, it has worked toward justifying torture as an instrument of national security and has avoided the investigation and prosecution of those involved.

Impunity, however, has a cost. Using the Philippines as a case study, McCoy explores how impunity creates an atmosphere of superiority among torture perpetrators. During Pres. Corazon Aquino's administration, the various uprisings led by the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM) scarred the restoration of formal democracy. Torture, according to McCoy, warps the perpetrators' notion of superiority, while impunity legitimizes the power that torture bestows. This sense of empowerment enabled RAM members, most of them torture perpetrators during the Marcos regime

who avoided prosecution, to justify their supremacy over civilian authority and their attempts to grab state power after 1986, severely hindering the process of democratization.

The book presents in the sixth chapter (The Outcast of Camp Echo) the biography of David Hicks, the first “unlawful combatant” tried by military commissions after enduring months of torture in Guantanamo. Hicks’s case represents the preemptive nature of US policies on torture and justice: despite the lack of substantial evidence, those accused of terrorism are denied due process and tortured into submission. Although Hicks eventually received a lighter sentence, his case severely damaged America’s standing as a global leader in democracy and human rights and led to serious doubts not just about the legality but also the rationality of the War on Terror.

In the concluding chapter (Psychological Torture and Forgetting), McCoy argues that, despite the promises of the Obama administration to address issues of torture, it has followed the process of impunity that has not only exonerated the perpetrators and advocates of torture but also ensured the retention of the vast executive powers it inherited from the War on Terror. Utilizing a variety of methods such as blaming “bad apples,” revisions to historical record, and the framing of human rights advocates as enemies of national security and unity (246), the Obama administration has maintained its capability to “detain, interrogate and assassinate . . . for the duration of an open-ended war” (263). It has fended off attempts by civil societies and international institutions to hold the US government accountable for its use of aggressive security measures and torture. The US government’s stance on torture has also bred a collective sense of forgetting, a means for the government to elicit the American public’s passive acceptance of the CIA’s history of torture despite the high value they place on democracy and human rights. Public forgetting did not just create indifference to the US government’s continued use of torture on its perceived enemies, but also paved the way for the erosion of the moral authority of the US to police the world and created apathy among US citizens toward democratic rights that were once considered fundamental to American society.

*Torture and Impunity* is an exceptional academic work, but it is also characteristic of McCoy’s other works that seek to transcend the scholarly

desire for mere articulation by engaging in the discourses of democratization and social transformation. The book serves to piece together a history of torture in the modern period and offers a commentary on how society has responded to the issues that torture and impunity have raised. The violent scenes in Abu Ghraib and other interrogation camps cannot be seen as either isolated or contemporary in character. They are part of a global historical narrative on the use of physical and psychological violence to achieve political ends. As McCoy cautions, both state and social actors must be aware of the price the world pays for its disregard of the moral and ethical questions on torture and the continued impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of torture.

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JUN CRUZ REYES

## **Ka Amado**

Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2012. 424 pages.

Jun Cruz Reyes takes a new approach in writing his latest literary gem, *Ka Amado*. He uses a historico-biographical style not only to narrate Amado V. Hernandez's life but also to elicit from the reader an appreciation for the importance of geography in shaping individuals and society. Reyes presents literature as a reconstruction of history based on collective memory. He argues that personal experiences are products of human interaction with the environment, which also serves as a means of developing social awareness. Literature as history is thus a codification of human experiences.

Reyes contends that the physical environment and sociohistorical aspects of Tondo and Hagonoy, two key places in Hernandez's life, are sources of information to deepen one's understanding of Hernandez's personal experiences. Hernandez was born on 13 September 1903 in Daang Juan Luna, Gagalangin Tondo. His parents, Juan Hernandez of Hagonoy and Clara Vera of Baliuag, were both natives of Bulacan province.