

Torture from Afghanistan to Iraq: 'A Playbook from the Dark Ages'

On March 8, President Bush, acting under the direct influence of Vice President Cheney, vetoed the Intelligence Authorization bill, which would have banned torture by the CIA, or any civilian agency. The vetoed bill prohibited any methods of interrogation beyond those permitted by the *Army Field Manual on Intelligence Collection*—which experienced military interrogators say is *all* that is needed, no matter what the circumstances.

Eight days earlier, a conference call urging the President to sign the Intelligence Authorization bill, with its anti-torture provision, was held by two retired U.S. Army generals, Lt. Gen. Harry Soyster (former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency), and Maj. Gen. William Nash (former U.S. commander in Bosnia-Herzegovina), who were joined by former National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, and Alex Gibney, the Oscar-winning filmmaker of "Taxi to the Dark Side" (reviewed in the March 7 issue of *EIR*).

General Soyster, the former DIA head, noted that he is part of a group of 44 retired combat commanders who had sent a letter to Congress urging passage of the *Army Field Manual* provision mandating a single standard of prisoner treatment. Speaking from his intelligence background, Soyster said, in remarks that presaged Bush's defense of his veto a week later:

"But to hear some people tell it, the *Field Manual* sounds like it's 'interrogation for dummies,' fine for unsophisticated military recruits doing battlefield interviews, but supposedly lacking the advanced techniques the CIA says it needs to get information out of al-Qaeda prisoners. That is nonsense. Experience shows that the *Field Manual's* approaches to interrogation work. It contains all the techniques any good interrogator needs to get accurate, reliable information, including out of our toughest customers. It authorizes a wide range of approaches and allows flexibility to tailor interrogation plans to the particular circumstances...."

"Some people want to believe that torture is a magic bullet for extracting information. They say it's naive to think we can get information from terrorist prisoners without it. But in my view, those promoting the use of the so-called harsh techniques are the ones who are naive and living in a fantasy world.... They have a primitive understanding of what works, and are using a playbook from the Dark Ages. We don't need a playbook from the Dark Ages; we need a single standard that is easily understood and can be used by all, and that is the *Army Field Manual*."

EIR's Pentagon correspondent Carl Osgood and *EIR* Law Editor Edward Spannaus participated in that Feb. 29 teleconference, which was sponsored by Human Rights First. A few days later, Spannaus interviewed filmmaker Alex Gibney. Excerpts of that interview follow.

Interview: Alex Gibney

Alex Gibney is the director and co-producer of "Taxi to the Dark Side," which won the Academy Award for the Best Documentary Feature of 2007. His previous credits include "Enron: the Smartest Guys in the Room," which was nominated for an Academy Award for 2005. Gibney was interviewed by Edward Spannaus on March 5.



Courtesy of THINKFilm

EIR: Alex, you dedicated the film, in part, to your father, and you had a video clip of your father at the end. Can you tell us how the film came about, and what was his role?

Gibney: He wasn't responsible for the film coming about, but he did play an important role in terms of encouraging me to continue on, and to really dig at it. I had a chat with him just before he died, and wasn't intending to talk to him about this. But, he said: "Go get your camera." So I went and got my camera and ended up shooting a little interview with him, without lights, or skilled personnel, where he just talked about his own experiences as an interrogator in World War II, what he learned, and also how angry he was, that he felt the values that he had fought for were being transgressed.

EIR: In terms of the soldiers who were on the ground there, at Bagram [Air Base, in Afghanistan] or elsewhere, one of the most poignant parts of the film is the conflict in their minds, from doing what they thought they were supposed to do, or what their chain of command wanted them to do, and then the realization, later, of what they had actually done. Were you aware of that going in, or did this

emerge...?

Gibney: I was aware not entirely of what they had done, and completely what their role was. But we had a list of many of the MPs who were stationed at Bagram, as well as the MI [Military Intelligence] personnel. And we started contacting people from that list, to see if we could persuade people to talk.

EIR: Was it difficult?

Gibney: Yes. But I think once we started getting one or two, the word spread, and we were able to get a few more. But there were a lot of people we asked who either declined, or we couldn't find.

EIR: Damien Corsetti¹ was featured in the film. Could you tell us a little bit more about him, and what was the process he went through, or that you went through with him, in the course of making the film?

Gibney: I've since come to know Damien a good bit better than I did then. I think that he was motivated through his attorney to speak up, because he felt that he had been somewhat scapegoated for things that ultimately, he wasn't guilty of, at least through a judicial proceeding. But he had nonetheless seen a lot of things, and felt that he had witnessed a kind of standard operating procedure that wasn't exactly the way they write it up in the manual. So that he wasn't interested in talking, and I think, angry at the military, for coming after him for what were, in his view, I think, standard operating procedures. Not the way you write them down in the book, but the way they were practiced on the ground at Bagram.

EIR: He clearly comes across as recognizing what they did was very wrong, but nonetheless, in the situation they were in, they felt compelled to conduct themselves in this way.

Gibney: Yes, compelled. He may have even gone a little further. I think they were compelled or encouraged, and after a while, you sort of go along. But Damien is quite a smart guy, and I think he had a sense that something was not quite right.

EIR: It came across pretty clearly, that there was no doubt that they felt that this is what their chain of command wanted them to do.

Gibney: No doubt. None of the people I talked to expressed any doubt. The chain of command never ordered them or encouraged them to kill people. But there was a kind of pressure to produce intelligence, even as there was, Scott Hor-

1. SPC Damien Corsetti was given the name "King of Torture" by his fellow MI soldiers. Although he did not participate in the beatings of the prisoner Dilawar, Corsetti was charged with various offenses including maltreatment of prisoners and assault. Corsetti fought the charges, and was acquitted on all counts.



Courtesy of THINKFilm

A clip from "Taxi to the Dark Side." The film makes clear that there was a conflict in the minds of many soldiers, between what they thought their officers wanted them to do, and what they later realized they had actually done.

ton² says, a kind of "fog of ambiguity" about what the rules were. The soldiers improvised, according to the limited training that they had. That peroneal strike was something they learned in a day's seminar, a sort of ad hoc seminar, at Fort Dix, just before they went over to Afghanistan. It was a prison guard who taught it to everybody.

EIR: One of the things that comes through as well, is the lack of clarity in what the rules were—that the old rules of the Geneva Conventions didn't apply, but nothing was put in their place. What's the effect on these guys, of being thrust into that kind of situation?

Gibney: it really puts them in a very difficult bind. What's their defense, when somebody prosecutes them? How are they supposed to respond? There are no guidelines, and the officers are just kind of pushing them into actions that they may or may not condone, or they appear to be condoning, but then, in retrospect, these kids are prosecuted. So it's a very dangerous situation. It's also a situation that leads to a breakdown in discipline and morale. If you don't know what the rules are, how are you supposed to do your job? And the rules keep changing, and they keep adapting.

EIR: [Is there] a lot of resentment against their officers, and the people that wanted them to do this, and then they turn around and say, "Oh, these are the bad apples"?

Gibney: That's right. Damien and others said that. They said: "The brass knew, they saw them shackled, they saw them hooded, they saw them shackled with their hands to the ceiling."

2. Scott Horton, a specialist in international and human rights law, was secretly contacted in 2003 by senior military lawyers who were alarmed at what was going on. Horton discussed the parallels with the Nazi legal regime and war crimes, in an interview published in the Jan. 28, 2005 *EIR*.



Courtesy of THINKFilm

Interrogation of a detainee, from "Taxi to the Dark Side."

Cheney's 'Dark Side'

EIR: One thing that certainly has struck me, and I'm sure you, too, is just the very idea that torture is acceptable. It not something that a generation ago, or even ten years ago, people would have accepted.

Gibney: It's hard to imagine that we're even discussing this. It's happened before; let's not be naive. There was some very dicey stuff that happened in Vietnam; but what's never happened before, is that you have a mechanism by which the people at the top of the chain of command try to figure out how they could re-engineer the rules, so that torture would be permissible. And you wouldn't call it "torture"; that's one of the ways you do it. You call it "coercive interrogation techniques." You find another way of defining it. But they were obsessed with it, and seemingly obsessed with that, without really understanding the precedents, and understanding why there are prohibitions on it to begin with.

EIR: You're referring to people like Cheney...?

Gibney: Yes, Cheney, and Addington, and Yoo, and Haynes, and Rumsfeld.³ You know, all these people seemed interested in going over to the dark side, and hitting back, and getting quick results, and not being constrained by any law, or any rule.

EIR: The popular culture aspect of this thing: I was glad that you went into Jack Bauer and the "24" phenomenon, because, I've heard that this has an effect even on the troops....

Gibney: You've probably read Jane Mayer's [*New Yorker*] article about this: Dean Finnegan going out to Hollywood

to talk to [Joel] Surnow and try to implore him to stop.⁴ But I do think there is a reason that "24" resonates with people. People are emotionally hardwired to want to strike back. Who wouldn't be? But we're supposed to be led by leaders who are tough enough, not to give in to cheap motives of retribution.

EIR: Experienced military officers know that you must have clarity, and very strict discipline in these situations, because the pressures will otherwise inevitably lead to this kind of thing.

Gibney: It will inevitably lead to a platoon becoming a mob instead of a disciplined force.

EIR: The idea that this has now become part of popular culture—

Gibney: The pernicious part of that has become, obviously, the ticking time bomb, something that, from an intellectual perspective, everybody seems to fall prey to. But it is really the pernicious kind of argument, because it is a hypothetical, based on something that's never happened. Why should we design an interrogation policy around something that's never, ever happened? What sense does that make? Should we design our national defense around possible invasion from outer space?

EIR: One thing I had not heard before, about the migration of interrogation techniques, was the "chat-room" element of it, which you've talked about. I was aware that some of this stuff went to Bagram, and then the Bagram people coming to Abu Ghraib, and [Guantanamo commander] Geoffrey Miller going there, and telling them to use this stuff. But this chat-room thing is something new.

Gibney: One of the interesting things that I found about that Human Rights First call, was that we were talking about why it was important that the CIA be held to the same standards as the military. The reason is, that it's natural, if your buddies are being killed around you, and you see some guy beating up on a detainee, just because he's got Raybans and khakis on, you're thinking, "Well, I should be able to do that too. I want to have at it. These guys aren't playing by the same rules. We should get to play by those rules." It's somewhere between contagion and a kind of weird can-do spirit. "Oh, I guess they're doing that in Guantanamo. I guess it's okay for us to do it." Or, "We might want to try this, maybe *ex-officio*." And that's how some of these things, when introduced in ways that are supposed to be pure, end up corrupting everything. That's why Colonel [Lawrence] Wilkerson [for-

3. These references are to Cheney's legal counsel David Addington, John Yoo of the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel, and William J. Haynes, the Department of Defense General Counsel; these three worked closely together to override the Geneva Conventions and to justify torture and abuse of prisoners.

4. Jane Mayer's article in the Feb. 19, 2007 *New Yorker* describes how Brig. Gen. Patrick Finnegan, the dean of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, accompanied by three of the most experienced interrogators in the country, flew to Hollywood to meet with the producers of Fox TV's "24," to implore them to stop glorifying torture. They argued that the show was having a toxic effect on American soldiers.



U.S. Air Force/Senior Airman Julianne Showalter

Dick Cheney in Iraq, March 18, 2008. Asked what he would ask Cheney if had the chance, Gibney replied: "I'd ask him: 'Why?' I'd ask him why he was so obsessed with this ... so intent on breaking down the rules that would prohibit torture...."

mer chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell], talks about that, when the guy is with a prisoner. He's got a dog, and the dog is supposed to be muzzled, and the prisoner doesn't react, so he takes the muzzle off. And then when he still doesn't react, well, then you move the dog a little bit closer. And they know about this, it's human nature. There is a well-documented history of this stuff, as to why they have these rules in place. So the migration is something that—a lot of people talk about how it moved via Miller to Gitmo. But the fact was, nobody is really focussed on how it moved from Gitmo to Bagram, and then from Bagram to Abu Ghraib. It wasn't just Geoffrey Miller. Which leads you to believe, that in all likelihood, this stuff was migrating all over.

EIR: What are these chat rooms?

Gibney: People are using part of the military Internet from Bagram to Guantanamo. The people in Bagram learned that some of these techniques were being used in Guantanamo. Despite the fact that they were only authorized for one particular prisoner, under certain circumstances, nevertheless, mysteriously, people in Bagram started using them.

EIR: Were these officers, or enlisted personnel...?

Gibney: I can't say. I'm not going to say.

EIR: Were you surprised about the award, the Oscar?

Gibney: Not surprised. I was not shocked, but I wasn't counting on it. I didn't think it was a lock, but I didn't think it was impossible, either. So, I was delighted. Let's put it that way.

EIR: What kind of reaction have you gotten since?

Gibney: Since then, it has had a very positive reaction, in terms of the reception of the film. So, that's been good.

EIR: From military people...?

Gibney: Generally speaking, the military reaction to the film has been very positive. I gave a screening in Washington, D.C., and right after the screening, two very young Marines came up to me afterwards, and shook my hand, saying: "Thank you very much. I really appreciated that." And it's now, so far as I'm aware, being taught at the Army JAG [Judge Advocates General] school, in Charlottesville, Va.

EIR: If you ran into Dick Cheney somewhere, from what you know from interviewing these soldiers and making the film, what would you say to him?

Gibney: I'd ask him: "Why?" I'd ask him why he was so obsessed with this. I would ask him why he was so intent on using these techniques, and breaking down the rules that would prohibit torture, when all the evidence would lead you to believe that it was a fool's errand. I would ask him the question "Why?" I'd love to be able to pose that question to him. And where did he get the idea that this is going to be so successful? And why did he think that it was not going to backfire? And why did he think it was going to lead to good intelligence, as opposed to bad intelligence? I would love to ask him that question. Somehow, I don't think I'm going to have the opportunity.