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Interrogating the Enemy

The Story of the CIA's Interrogation of Top al-Qa'ida Terrorists

(Working Title)

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Architect of the CIA Interrogation Program

With Bill Harlow

1 long time ago not to be offended by this sort of posturing. It frequently went away when
2 you got on the ground and started working.

3
4 The operational psychologist told me that our task on the way over was to rough out a
5 design for the cell where Zubaydah was to be held. We were told that, because of his
6 importance as a potential source of intelligence and the severity of his injury, the cell
7 needed to be lighted 24 hours a day. Closed circuit TV cameras were also required. We
8 wanted Zubaydah focused on the interrogators and for the cell to not be a source of dis-
9 tracting stimulation, so we recommended they paint it white. Speakers were needed so
10 music could be played, mostly as sound masking for security reasons because the
11 guards were located just outside the door, but also, if ordered, as an irritant to wear on
12 him if he chose not to cooperate. The finished product looked like a jail cell in an Amer-
13 ican cowboy movie, a big white jail cell with black steel bars and a steel bar cell door
14 across the front.

15 ***

16 **The first few weeks**

17 Shortly after arriving at the Black Site on the other side of the world, we met up with CIA
18 officers who had been dealing with Abu Zubaydah since he arrived there from Pakistan
19 and two FBI Special Agents. One was an Arabic-speaking Shia Muslim, named Ali
20 Soufan; the other, a fit, red-haired more senior Special Agent who spoke with a New
21 England accent. I name Soufan here only because in the ensuing dozen years he has
22 spoken frequently and publicly about the several months he spent there.

23

1 after waterboarding they didn't believe they could protect secrets anymore. I told Jose
2 about waterboarding at a meeting the next day.

3

4 A day or so later Rodriguez asked me if I would help put together an interrogation pro-
5 gram using EITs. I told him I would, thinking I would remain in the role I had occupied
6 during the first few months, pointing out resistance techniques employed by the detain-
7 ees and advising on the psychological aspects of interrogation. But that's not what he
8 had in mind. Jose not only wanted me to help them craft the program, he wanted me to
9 conduct the interrogations using EITs myself.

10

11 I was surprised. And reluctant. I knew that if I agreed, my life as I knew it would be over.
12 I would never again be able to work as a psychologist. Hesitantly I said, "I can help you
13 find somebody..." But then one of Jose's colleagues cut me off saying, "Knowing all you
14 know about the threat, if you're not willing to help, how can we ask someone else?"

15

16 My mind flashed to the victims of 9/11—to the "falling man" who chose to dive headfirst
17 off the Twin Towers rather than burn to death and to the passengers of United Flight 83
18 who bravely sacrificed their lives to save the lives of other Americans. I thought, if they
19 can sacrifice their lives, I can do this. I didn't want to, but I would ...

20

21 So I agreed. "But," I said, "I can't do it by myself. I need someone more familiar with the
22 techniques than I am." Rodriguez said, "Who do you need?" I said, "Bruce Jessen." He
23 was onboard by the end of the next week.

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Back in my room that night I had trouble sleeping. The magnitude of what I had agreed to do for Rodriquez was gnawing on me. Now in the stillness of my hotel room with nothing to distract me, two things were pulling at the edge of my thoughts, keeping me awake: Could I do it and should I do it?

Could I do it? I ran a mental check list of experiences that prepared me to do what they were asking, and concluded I could, especially with Bruce's help.

Rodriquez wasn't asking me to do law enforcement interrogations. They had already tried that and it wasn't working. And I knew they were going to have a CIA law enforcement interrogation expert deployed with us. By this time, I'd watched him and the two FBI agents conduct hundreds of interrogations.

I also knew that they were going to get rough with Abu Zubaydah whether I helped or not.

No, the question was about my qualifications to put together a psychologically based interrogation program that would condition Abu Zubaydah to cooperate and then interrogate him using it. I knew it would need to be based on what is called "Pavlovian Classical Conditioning" (more on this later) and I was very familiar with it because my early training was as a behavioral psychologist. I used Pavlovian conditioning many, many

1 After he observed Abu Zubaydah being waterboarded, the COS set up a video confer-
2 ence with the leadership at CTC so we could discuss the issue. Those of us at the Black
3 Site thought that those at headquarters didn't have a good idea of what waterboarding
4 was really like. They talked about it like it was some kind of sterile, impersonal proce-
5 dure. So to prepare for the conference call, the criminal investigator at the site spliced
6 together a video of what a typical waterboarding session looked like and then added in
7 multiple scenes of Abu Zubaydah clearing water from his sinuses taken from several
8 different sessions.

9
10 Jose Rodriguez chaired the video conference. My take was that he was trying to be an
11 honest arbitrator of the issue. He seemed focused on preventing another attack inside
12 the United States, and wanted to do it in the most straightforward way possible. He was
13 being assailed by advocates on both side of the argument, but seemed objective and
14 not locked in on any one approach. We showed the video tape and voiced our opinion
15 that we didn't need to continue using EITs, especially waterboarding. Not surprisingly
16 some in the room with Rodriguez objected. One or two, objected vigorously. They in-
17 sisted we continue waterboarding Abu Zubaydah for at least 30 days. That's when it
18 dawned on me that my answer months before to Jose Rodriguez's question about how
19 long it would take for me to believe a person subjected to EITs "either didn't have the
20 information or was going to take it to the grave with them" had come back to haunt us. I
21 pointed out that comment was made before waterboarding was incorporated into the list
22 of potential EITs and didn't apply anymore. Bruce and I told them we would not continue
23 routinely waterboarding Abu Zubaydah. We asked them to send their "most skeptical"

1 We waterboarded Abu Zubaydah with them in the cell unmasked and on camera. It was
2 ugly and hard to do. After it was over, we washed Abu Zubaydah with warm water,
3 cleaned him up and told him we never wanted to do that again. He cried and promised
4 to work for the CIA. Everyone, even those observing were tearful.

5

6 Later in the day, after Abu Zubaydah had a chance to recover, the senior officer in
7 charge of the visitors and the most skeptical person took turns questioning him. They
8 spent hours with him. They came out seemingly pleased with the information they ob-
9 tained, saying he was a “treasure trove” of knowledge. They agreed we should stop
10 EITs because the information we could get without them was too important and could
11 be combined with other intelligence and used to stop attacks. They spent several more
12 days questioning Abu Zubaydah, having in-depth conversations with maps and charts
13 and photographs. Then they left.

14

15 About a week passed. Abu Zubaydah was answering questions. He was providing in-
16 formation on Ramzi bin al-Shibh, one of KSM’s operatives, who Abu Zubaydah said was
17 likely in Karachi, Pakistan working with KSM. Bin al-Shibh was later caught and provid-
18 ed information that helped capture KSM. Abu Zubaydah was providing fuller and more
19 complete answers to questions about terrorists who could move in and out of the United
20 States with relative ease, such as Jafar al-Tayyar, a US citizen with pilot training who
21 had lived in Florida. During this time, Abu Zubaydah was also providing information that
22 helped led to the capture of Hassan Ghul, whose information about Usama Bin Ladin’s
23 courier helped lead to the location and killing of Bin Ladin.

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2 Some human rights groups have publicly accused the CIA of blinding Abu Zubaydah,
3 speculating that he now has to wear an eye patch, because of injuries incurred during
4 some brutal interrogation gone wrong. The truth is, however, Abu Zubaydah's pirate
5 look was the result of his own attempt to become a terrorist internet celebrity while hid-
6 ing in plain sight. Abu Zubaydah is blind in his left eye because he wanted to be famous
7 and he came up with a comic book scheme to make it happen. He wanted to be a su-
8 per villain, the face of terror on the internet, raising money to attack and kill innocent vic-
9 tims while living the high life, safe, hiding in plain sight, protected by a new face. And as
10 often happens with people driven by twisted ambition, it backfired on him.

11

12 We used EITs on Abu Zubaydah for a little over two weeks. We didn't use them again.

13 After that, Bruce and I spent over seventy days questioning him using non-coercive,
14 rapport based and social influence approaches before I left the Black Site and Bruce
15 stayed to continue the mission without me. Headquarters wanted one of us to take a
16 break so we could rotate being at the Black Site. I was told to go home first because in
17 the previous seven months, I had spent less than 9 days at home.

18

19 I left feeling good about what we had accomplished. Although, I knew Abu Zubaydah
20 was continuing to hold some information back—they all did—but, he was cooperative
21 enough that headquarters seemed pleased with the information he was providing. The
22 targeters and analysts told me that his information significantly increased their under-

CHAPTER 10 – THE WHEELS COME OFF

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It was in late 2003 when KSM told me that eventually the United States would “present its neck for slaughter.” Little did I know that KSM’s predictions would come true so soon.

April 28, 2004. I was at home, between trips, just back from 41 days out of the country, when the Abu Ghraib photographs slammed into America’s consciousness and set in motion a cascading series of events that would eventually cause the wheels to completely come off the CIA’s interrogation program.

The photos were awful. Naked prisoners piled on top of each other with grinning U.S. military police in the back ground making a thumbs-up gesture. A soldier sitting on a detainee pressed between two stretchers. Naked prisoners led around on leashes. And some poor prisoner standing on a box, hooded, draped in a black blanket, arms out like he had been crucified, with electric wires attached to his fingers.

My heart sunk as soon as I saw them. I understood what had happened. I had studied the psychological mechanisms that lead to that sort of abusive drift, even so I was surprised and dismayed to see it. I was also angry.

Not only was it morally wrong to treat detainees this way, I knew the CIA’s interrogation program would take a hit because of the stupid and self-indulgent criminal activities of a few bored and poorly supervised Military Police officers.

1 In September 6, 2006, President Bush publicly acknowledged the existence of the CIA's
2 detention and interrogation program (which for some time had been one of the world's
3 worst kept secrets). The President announced that all the existing CIA detainees had
4 been moved into military custody at GTMO. As a result, the CIA lost the ability to tap
5 into their al-Qa'ida knowledge base. KSM University was closed for good. I understood
6 and appreciated that it was important that high-value detainees, especially KSM, even-
7 tually be tried for their crimes. Americans had a right to justice. But, I knew we would
8 miss being able to rely on their collective understanding of al-Qa'ida terror networks,
9 their knowledge of key players moving into al-Qa'ida leadership roles, and their capacity
10 to help us make sense out of coded or obscure messages.

11
12 During the last stand down, while we were waiting for Congress to act, interrogators
13 were asked to provide a bare bones list of EITs that CIA could submit to the DOJ for re-
14 view and be used to seek congressional support. All the interrogators converged on
15 Langley and spend several days putting together recommendations. Almost unanimous-
16 ly we all agreed that only two EITs were required for the conditioning process: walling
17 and sleep deprivation. The others, while occasionally useful, were not critical. And
18 some, like nudity, slaps, facial holds, dietary manipulation, and cramped confinement,
19 Bruce and I now believed were completely unnecessary.

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21 We briefed our recommendations to the mid-level CIA officers who were working the
22 issue for CIA leadership. We told them we only needed walling and sleep deprivation.