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'Communist torture' used at Guantanamo Bay

Correspondents in Washington | *July 03, 2008*

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A CHART outlining "coercive management techniques" for US interrogators at Guantanamo Bay was copied verbatim from a 1957 US Air Force study of Chinese communist techniques used during the Korean War to obtain confessions - many of them false - from US prisoners.

The New York Times reported the chart listed techniques for use on prisoners including "sleep deprivation", "prolonged constraint" and "exposure".

Reporting the origins of the chart, the paper said it was the latest and most vivid evidence of the way communist interrogation methods the US has long condemned as torture became the basis for interrogations by the military at the Guantanamo Bay prison camp, and by the Central Intelligence Agency. Some of the methods were used against a number of prisoners at Guantanamo before 2005, when Congress banned the use of coercion by the military, the report said.

The CIA is still authorised by US President George W. Bush to use a range of secret "alternative" interrogation methods.

Several Guantanamo documents, including the chart outlining the coercive methods, were made public at a Senate armed services committee hearing on June 17 that examined how such tactics came to be employed.

But committee investigators were not aware of the chart's source, a connection pointed out to The New York Times by an independent interrogation expert.

The 1957 article from which the chart was copied was headed "Communist Attempts to Elicit False Confessions From Air Force Prisoners of War" and was written by Alfred D. Biderman, a sociologist then working for the US Air Force, who died in 2003,

Biderman interviewed US prisoners returning from North Korea, some of whom were filmed by their Chinese interrogators confessing to germ warfare and other atrocities.

The orchestrated confessions led to allegations the US prisoners were "brainwashed", and prompted the US military to revamp its training to give its personnel a taste of the harsh methods to inoculate them against quick capitulation if captured, the paper said.

In 2002, the training program, known as SERE, for Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape, became a source of interrogation methods for the CIA and the US military. In what critics describe as a remarkable case of historical amnesia, the officials who drew on the SERE program appear to have been unaware it was created as a result of concerns about false confessions by US prisoners.

Democrat senator Carl Levin, of Michigan, chairman of the armed services committee, told the paper after reviewing the 1957 article that "every American would be shocked" by the origin of the interrogation chart.

"What makes this document doubly stunning is that these were techniques to get false confessions," Senator Levin said.

"People say we need intelligence, and we do. But we don't need false intelligence."

A spokesman for the US Department of Defence, Lieutenant Colonel Patrick Ryder, said he could not comment on the Guantanamo training manual. "I can't speculate on previous decisions that may have been made prior to current DOD policy on interrogations," Colonel Ryder told the paper. "I can tell you current DOD policy is clear - we treat all detainees humanely."

Biderman's 1957 article described "one form of torture" used by the Chinese as forcing US prisoners to stand "for exceedingly long periods", sometimes in conditions of "extreme cold".

Such methods were more common than outright physical violence, he wrote.

Prolonged standing and exposure to cold have both been used by US military and CIA interrogators against terrorist suspects.

The chart listed other techniques used by the Chinese, including "Semi-Starvation", "Exploitation of Wounds" and "Filthy, Infested Surroundings", along with their effects: "Makes Victim Dependent on Interrogator", "Weakens Mental and Physical Ability to Resist" and "Reduces Prisoner to 'Animal Level' Concerns".

The only change made in the chart used at Guantanamo was to drop its original title: "Communist Coercive Methods for Eliciting Individual Compliance".

Robert Jay Lifton, a psychiatrist who also studied the returning US prisoners of war and wrote an accompanying article in the same 1957 issue of The Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine, said he was disturbed to learn the Chinese methods were recycled and taught at Guantanamo.

"It saddens me," said Dr Lifton, who wrote a 1961 book on what the Chinese called "thought reform", which became known in popular US parlance as brainwashing. He called the use of the Chinese techniques by US interrogators at Guantanamo Bay a "180-degree turn".

The harshest known interrogation at Guantanamo was that of Mohammed al-Qahtani, a member of al-Qa'ida suspected of being the intended 20th hijacker in the 9/11 attacks.

His interrogation involved sleep deprivation, stress positions, exposure to cold and other methods used by the Chinese.

The terror charges against Qahtani were dropped in May.

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