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Romney, Torture, and Teens

The former governor's connections to abusive "tough love" camps

[Maia Szalavitz](#) | June 27, 2007

When Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney said he'd support doubling the size of the prison at Guantanamo Bay, he was trying to show voters that he'd be tough on terror. Two of his top fundraisers, however, have long supported using tactics that have been likened to torture for troubled teenagers.

As *The Hill* [noted last week](#), 133 plaintiffs filed a civil suit against Romney's Utah finance co-chair, Robert Lichfield, and his various business entities involved in residential treatment programs for adolescents. The umbrella group for his organization is the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools (WWASPS, sometimes known as WWASP) and Lichfield is its founder and is on its board of directors.

The suit alleges that teens were locked in outdoor dog cages, exercised to exhaustion, deprived of food and sleep, exposed to extreme temperatures without adequate clothing or water, severely beaten, emotionally brutalized, and sexually abused and humiliated. Some were even made to eat their own vomit.

But the link to teen abuse goes far higher up in the Romney campaign. Romney's national finance co-chair is a man named Mel Sembler. A long time friend of the Bushes, Sembler was campaign finance chair for the Republican party during the first election of George W. Bush, and a major fundraiser for his father.

Like Lichfield, Sembler also founded a nationwide network of treatment programs for troubled youth. Known as Straight Inc., from 1976 to 1993, it variously operated nine programs in seven states. At all of Straight's facilities, state investigators and/or civil lawsuits documented scores of abuses including teens being beaten, deprived of food and sleep for days, restrained by fellow youth for hours, bound, sexually humiliated, abused and spat upon.

According to the *L.A. Times*, California investigators said that at Straight teens were "subjected to unusual punishment, infliction of pain, humiliation, intimidation, ridicule, coercion, threats, mental abuse... and interference with daily living functions such as eating, sleeping and toileting."

Through a spokesperson, Lichfield has dismissed the similar charges against WWASPS to *The Hill* as "ludicrous," claiming that the teens who sued "have a long history of lying, fabricating and twisting the story around to their own benefit."

Straight would use virtually identical language in its denials: In the 1990 *L.A. Times* article cited above, a Straight counselor downplayed the California investigators' report by saying, "Some kids get very upset and lie and some parents believe them." Both Straight and WWASPS have repeatedly called their teen participants "liars" and "manipulators" who oppose the programs because they want to continue taking drugs or engage in other bad behavior.

Curiously, however, both programs regularly admitted teens who did not actually have serious problems. In 1982, 18-year-old Fred Collins, a Virginia Tech student with excellent grades, went to visit his brother, who was in treatment for a drug problem at Straight in Orlando, Florida.

A counselor determined that he was high on marijuana because his eyes were red (this would later turn out to have been due to swimming in a pool with contacts on). He did admit to occasional marijuana use, but insisted he was not high at the time, nor was he an addict. Nonetheless, he was barraged with hours of humiliating questions, strip-searched, and held against his will for months until he managed to escape.

He won \$220,000 in a lawsuit he filed against the program for false imprisonment, intentional infliction of emotional distress, assault, and battery. Ultimately, Straight would pay out millions in settlements before it finally closed. However, to this day, there are at least eight programs operating that use Straight's methods, often in former Straight buildings operated by former Straight staff. They include: Alberta Adolescent Recovery Center (Canada), Pathway Family Center (Michigan, Indiana, Ohio), Growing Together (Florida), Possibilities Unlimited (Kentucky), SAFE (Florida), and Phoenix Institute for Adolescents (Georgia).

Sembler has never admitted to the problems with Straight's methods. In fact, when he recently served as Ambassador to Italy, he listed it among his accomplishments on his official State Department profile. Although all of the programs with the Straight name are closed, the nonprofit Straight Foundation that funded them still exists, though under a different name. It's now called the Drug Free America Foundation, and it lobbies for drug testing and in support of tougher policies in the war on drugs.

One of the plaintiffs in the current case against WWASPS, 21-year-old Chelsea Filer, spoke to me when I was researching a TV segment on the industry. She told me that she was forced to walk for miles on a track in scorching desert heat with a 35-pound sandbag on her back. "You were not allowed to scratch your face, move your fingers, lick your lips, move your eyes from the ground," she said. When she asked for a chapstick, "They put a piece of wood in my mouth and I had to hold it there for two weeks. I was bleeding on my tongue."

Why was Filer subject to such punishment? "I had less interest in school and more interest in boys and my mom was worried about me," she says, explaining that her mother believed that the program was nothing more than a strict boarding school.

Because she has attention deficit disorder, Filer was unable to consistently follow the exacting rules, and repeated small violations were seen as ongoing defiance. "It broke my heart that my mom had no belief in me," she says, describing how, because WWASPS had told her mother to dismiss complaints as "manipulation," her mother ignored her pleas to come home.

"I'm not a bad kid," she continued, "I never used drugs, I was never in trouble, I have no criminal record. I know my mom was worried about me—but so many times I told her that this is too much. I would gladly have gone to prison instead."

WWASPS is linked with facilities Academy at Ivy Ridge (New York), Carolina Springs Academy (South Carolina), Cross Creek Programs (Utah), Darrington Academy (Georgia), Horizon Academy (Nevada), Majestic Ranch Academy (Utah), MidWest Academy (Iowa), Respect Camp (Mississippi), Royal Gorge Academy (Colorado), Spring Creek Lodge (Montana), and Tranquility Bay (Jamaica).

Although it has settled several lawsuits out of court, the organization has never publicly admitted wrong-doing. However, the U.S. State Department spurred Samoa to investigate its Paradise Cove program in 1998 after receiving “credible allegations of physical abuse,” including “beatings, isolation, food and water deprivation, choke-holds, kicking, punching, bondage, spraying with chemical agents, forced medication, verbal abuse and threats of further physical abuse.” Paradise Cove closed shortly thereafter. That same year, the Czech Republic forced the closure of WWASP-linked Morava Academy following employees’ allegations that teens were being abused.

The former director of the Dundee Ranch Academy Program in Costa Rica went to local authorities after seeing medical neglect and other severe abuse, although human rights abuse charges were ultimately dropped against the owner, Robert Lichfield’s brother Narvin. That program closed in 2003.

Police in Mexico have shut down three WWASP-linked facilities: Sunrise Beach (1996), Casa By The Sea (2004) and High Impact (where police videotaped the teens chained in dog cages).

In 2005, New York’s Eliot Spitzer forced WWASP to return over \$1 million to the parents of Academy at Ivy Ridge students, because the school had fraudulently claimed to provide legitimate New York high school diplomas. He fined Ivy Ridge \$250,000, plus \$2000 in court costs. A civil suit has been filed for educational fraud in New York as well, by a different law firm.

Straight's Sembler currently heads the Scooter Libby Defense Fund, in addition to his work for Romney, and has worked tirelessly to keep the Vice President's former Chief of Staff out of prison, even after his conviction on charges of perjury and obstruction of justice. After all, if running programs that impose these kinds of "treatments" on American teenagers is not a prison-worthy offense, why should lying to a court be?

The Romney campaign is aware of the WWASP suits, and should be familiar with the Straight suits. If not, it's worth asking: Does Romney support these types of tactics for at-risk youth? Or does he take the line the organizations founded by his fundraisers take—that these dozens of lawsuits are merely from bad kids who make up lies?

Coming from the man who wants to double the size of Guantanamo, these aren't insignificant questions. If Romney doesn't believe the aggressive tactics he supports for use against enemy combatants ought to be used against troubled teens and youth drug users, he should say so, and show he means it by removing these men from his campaign.

Maia Szalavitz is author of [Help At Any Cost: How the Troubled-Teen Industry Cons Parents and Hurts Kids](#) (Riverhead, 2006) and a senior fellow at [stats.org](#). Her latest book, co-written with Dr. Bruce D. Perry is [The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog and Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook](#). (Basic Books, 2007).

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