the torture of waterboarding, then and now

November 6, 2006

U.S. Vice-President Dick Cheney's recent remark that dunking prisoners in water is a "no-brainer" upset many people, including President George W. Bush, who wants to please the pro-torture types while pretending that the torture techniques he permits are not, in his opinion, torture, which means the U.S. does not torture, although it does. I will not enter this moral and legal maze. The first of the Geneva Conventions — treaties meant to establish international rules for wartime behaviour — was signed in 1864. The most recent incarnation appeared in 1977.

The rules state that torture is absolutely and utterly wrong.

But timid media coverage of Cheney's latest grotesquerie rather missed the point, as it often does. As far as I know, no reporter thought to question anyone who had survived the torture technique known as waterboarding. What countries have done it? What does it feel like?

To phrase it as a standard market survey, as I'm sure Bush's Republicans would like us to do over this minor matter, "Compared to other tortures, is waterboarding:

a) A welcome wash.

b) Preferable to working on the Burma Railway, which the Japanese built in the Second World War using — and thereby killing — tens of thousands of conscripted Asian labourers and Allied PoWs.

c) A no-brainer.

d) The worst thing the Japanese did to you, worse than even the white skin of your whole body turning "a uniform blue-black, swollen and puffy, like velvet in texture" from being beaten with axe-handles?"

Eric Lomax answers d). His 1995 memoir, The Railway Man, of his
time as a prisoner of war (PoW) in the Japanese prison camps of World War II, is one of the best war memoirs ever written and certainly one of the most informative on the personal experience of torture.

**Waterboarding was the only torture he blocked out**

In 1942, British army signalman Lomax, 23, was taken prisoner in Singapore by the Japanese. He would not be released until four days after the Japanese surrender on Sept. 2, 1945. I do not know how he survived. He does not know how he survived. Most readers will be amazed that he wished to.

Lomax was put on display, starved, kept in a barracks with snakes and foot-long centipedes, stored in a Guantanamo-style kennel, made to work almost unto death, kept in constant fear of execution, beaten as "scorching liquid pain seared through [his] body," kept naked, baked in the sun, made to clean his captors' toilets, left untreated with scabies that covered him with a yellow scab of pus that ate all his skin except his face and fingertips, and so on.

He is matter of fact when he writes about it. But when he comes to waterboarding — it was done during his interrogation about a secret radio built by the PoWs — 50 years later, he remembers every moment but one.

"The sensation of drowning, on dry land"

It began with a Cheney-style "dunking" so bad that his brain blocked out the memory. He was told later by a witness that he was taken to a bathroom with a big metal tub and his head was shoved under the water again and again.
There was an interpreter present who would take Lomax's pulse periodically to ensure he was still alive and available to endure further agony.

Lomax was then tied down on a bench, even though his arms had already been broken. The torturer came back with a hosepipe.

And this is waterboarding:

"He directed the full flow of the now-gushing pipe onto my nostrils and mouth…. Water poured down my windpipe and throat and filled my lungs and stomach. The torrent was unimaginably choking. This is the sensation of drowning, on dry land, on a hot dry afternoon. Your humanity bursts from within you as you gag and choke. I tried very hard to will unconsciousness but no relief came."

The beating and the interrogation continued. "I had nothing to say: I was beyond invention. So they turned on the tap again, and again there was that nausea of rising water from inside my bodily cavity."

5 decades later, witness still 'cannot stop shuddering'

Lomax lived. After the Japanese surrender, he returned to England to a work-filled, emotionally choked existence in which he never told anyone what he had endured. He was told once that his face was mask-like, utterly inscrutable at all times.

It wasn’t until he visited a great London institution called the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture that he found solace. He was 70.

The foundation was set up by Helen Bamber of Amnesty International. A Jewish woman, she had — at the age of 19 — cared for victims of the Nazis' PoW and concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen in 1945. She received him personally. "She seemed to have infinite time, endless patience and sympathy; but above all she gave
me time."

Then a fellow PoW sent him an article by Nagase Takashi, a Japanese interpreter who had helped the allies find their dead along the railway after the war. His picture accompanied the piece.

Lomax experienced an "icy joy of the weirdest kind." The man was the interpreter present through the agonies and the waterboarding. Lomax had hated him more than any other of his tormentors.

Nagase remembered Lomax, too. "They poured water into his mouth. I saw his stomach swelling up. I almost lost my presence of mind. With the prisoner screaming and crying 'Mother! Mother!' I muttered to myself, 'Mother, do you know what is happening to your son now?' I still cannot stop shuddering every time I recall that horrible scene." (Nagase and Lomax were to meet as old men and find some form of reconciliation. Nagase told CNN that he long believed he would be hanged as a war criminal for his part in the torture.)

So there you have it. That is the waterboarding of which Cheney is so casually proud. This is its effect on those who endure it and those who watch it.

**Waterboarding's history**

Waterboarding has an eerie history.

It was used in the 1500s during the Spanish Inquisition. The Americans used it in the Spanish-American War in 1901 and in Vietnam, but individual soldiers (not their commanders) were punished for doing it.

It was a favourite of the U.S.-allied Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in the 1970s, which used the American technique of placing cloth or cellophane over the face to impede breathing and ensure that the water was contained and ran back into the mouth and nose.
American prisoners were waterboarded by the Japanese in the Second World War, but I can find no allegations that the Nazis used the technique.

So there you have it, a brief history of waterboarding. We don't learn from war; we repeat it. We don't prevent war; we perfect it.

It is of course entirely up to you to decide whether the United States has sunk to the very levels of depravity that they once went to war to defeat.

This Week:

Despite the fact that liberal-leaning Huffington Post is a fine political website with some wonderful bloggers, it is a sorry fact that Arianna Huffington's latest book, On Becoming Fearless in Love, Work and Life, is crap. It aims to stiffen the sinews of women facing a misogynist world. Instead, its relentless mindless jargon, pathetic testimonials of rich people having surges of bravery ("I was snubbed at the fundraiser by people I Hampton with"), its homilies and quotes from idiotic New Age bestsellers mixed with tributes to facial microdermabrasion give any sane reader a migraine and a deep-tissue shame for one's once-a-decade attempt to find worth in self-help books.

On the bright side, Zadie Smith's On Beauty, the satire on academia that won her the Orange Prize this year, is heaven on a platter. In the background, I ran the opening sequence of the Mary Tyler Moore show from YouTube. Now that gives a woman confidence.

LETTERS:

Is Neil Peden kidding? Does he really not know the difference between a consentual act where one enjoys total control and being totally at the mercy of hostile strangers?
His equating of the Fox News 'Jackass' stunt and the actual practice of waterboarding is ridiculous.

Logic 101 time: the reason to US uses waterboarding is because it works to terrify and break prisoners, even hardened, trained combatants. It achieves this not because it is some harmless Frat boy stunt, but because it is a technique of torture just as described in Heather Mallick's excellent piece.

— Mike Kaulbars | Ottawa

"In fact, there is more than one method, one of which is to place cellophane over the mouth to prevent any water from entering the lungs while still providing the sensation of drowning."

Mr. Peden (below) seems to think that *this* form of torture is perfectly acceptable. I don't. I never cease to be amazed at the horrendous things that humans seem to think it's ok to do to others.

— Tia Leschke | Sooke, B.C.

Ms. Malick is misleading and completely irresponsible on the subject of waterboarding. She describes the method used during WWII by the Japanese, which involved filling the lungs with water (and correspondingly a real risk of death), without mentioning that this bears no resemblance to the method used by the CIA.

In fact, there is more than one method, one of which is to place cellophane over the mouth to prevent any water from entering the lungs while still providing the sensation of drowning.

In fact, a Fox news reporter underwent the procedure, on camera, and said that while it was extremely unpleasant he was conversing normally with no ill effects only minutes later. (The video is freely available to anyone who knows how to use Google.)

None of this is reflected in Ms. Malick's condemnation of waterboarding as torture, yet she purports to explain what
waterboarding is. Do facts not matter to Ms. Malick, or to the CBC? The CBC should print an immediate retraction of the factual errors and distortions in Ms. Malick's column.

—Neil Peden / Montreal