**Torture is an absolute No, No?**

Since Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, the US has been under scrutiny for its use of torture, and efforts by senior officials [to legalise it](http://www.torturingdemocracy.org/documents). Yet there is a widespread assumption that the British are less prone to these murky practices. Tuesday’s [Guardian report](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/oct/25/uk-military-interrogation-manuals?CMP=twt_gu) on British military interrogation manuals refutes that. British armed forces explicitly encouraged techniques similar to those for which the US has been repeatedly condemned. Unless the British armed and security forces abandon torture, Britain cannot claim to defend universal human rights.

The British manuals advocate a series of humiliating practices: threats, sleep and sensory deprivation, use of blindfolds, enforced nakedness for prolonged periods, physical examinations of the rectum and behind the foreskin. None of this matters for security. The reasons given are to humiliate prisoners and provoke fear, insecurity, and disorientation. These practices are outlawed by the Geneva Conventions and UK law. In an implicit acknowledgement of their illegality, the British manuals insist that these techniques be used in secret and ‘away from the media’.

It is worth remembering why these techniques are prohibited. Torture has profound short and long term effects on its victims, perpetrators and wider society. The contexts in which these techniques are used are terrifying for victims; ‘suspects’ who are tortured but not charged and denied access to lawyers. They do not know how far the torturers will go, how long they will be held, or whether they will survive. This undermines fundamental legal and moral principles.

We appear to be slipping into a mindset where torture is expected, not debated. Entertainment programmes from 24 to Spooks operate on the assumption that torture is both necessary and effective. [The head of MI6 yesterday](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/oct/28/mi6-chief-torture-john-sawers)  (a) condemned the actual practice of torture, while he (b) claimed Security Services need to accept intelligence obtained through torture to prevent terrorist attacks. So which is it, ‘C’? Torture does not work. Previous torture advocate, Jean Jacques Massu, who led the French counterinsurgency campaign in Algeria in the 1960s and used torture widely, later declared that torture fails to secure useful intelligence; instead it strengthens enemies, legitimising their own use of torture and terrorism. Even the [CIA Inspector General concluded](http://www.aclu.org/torturefoia/released/052708/052708_Special_Review.pdf) that waterboarding in the ‘War on Terror’ failed to yield any valuable intelligence pertaining to imminent security threats, and that the intelligence gained could have been acquired through legitimate means.

The US has a [history](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB122/index.htm) of advocating these practices. Given Britain’s close relationship with the US, Britain should be scrutinised for its complicity. This is particularly pressing in light of work by [Darius Rejali](http://academic.reed.edu/poli_sci/faculty/rejali/) which shows that numerous states, Britain and America included, have collaborated in the development and diffusion of torture practices, particularly those that leave no permanent physical marks. There are clear hints of torture being institutionally condoned by Britain, through the [presence of MI5 agents in the interrogations of British citizens](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/oct/26/guantanamo-torture-claims-court-case), later transferred to Guantánamo Bay, and the [abuse of detainees in Iraq](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/mar/16/baha-mousa-inquiry).

Strikingly similar techniques to those advocated in the leaked manuals were used by the British against IRA suspects in the 1970s. Known as the ‘five techniques’, (sleep deprivation, hooding, subjecting to noise, food and drink deprivation, and ‘wall standing’ or stress positions), they were [deemed inhuman and degrading, and therefore illegal](http://cmiskp.echr.coe.int/tkp197/view.asp?action=html&documentId=695383&portal=hbkm&source=externalbydocnumber&table=F69A27FD8FB86142BF01C1166DEA398649), by the European Court of Human Rights. The British government outlawed them, declaring ‘the “five techniques” will not in any circumstances be reintroduced as an aid to interrogation’. Yet the new manuals show that they are again a feature of British military practice. In a sleight of hand, by stating that ‘Torture is an absolute No No’, the manuals imply that these inhuman and degrading techniques are, somehow, legitimate. They fail to remind their staff that under British and international law, these techniques are absolutely prohibited.

We are in danger of accepting practices that were denounced in the Enlightenment and outlawed by the Geneva Conventions in 1949 for good reason. Elements of the UK’s armed forces are intent on using torture and inhuman and degrading treatment. It may be an uncomfortable subject, but not one that a democracy can afford to ignore.