

# The CIA, torture, history and American exceptionalism

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Discussing the recently released Senate report on American torture, my friend Michael Goldfarb quoted Senator Frank Church, speaking when his Senate committee's report was issued in 1975,<sup>1</sup> in the wake of the Rockefeller and Pike reports, the latter not released but leaked by Daniel Schorr in the *Village Voice* newspaper. Lest we forget, Church was marginalized, lost his Senate seat to a well-funded campaign, and, as we know, the domestic surveillance by the CIA and NSA and whoever else continued unchecked, at least until the Snowden revelations. Church's committee was regularly lied to by its witnesses and obstructed by the Ford administration; this was a committee that included such 'radicals' as Barry Goldwater, Richard Schweiker, John Tower, and Howard Baker.

At the time Church said:

'I know the capacity that is there to make tyranny total in America, and we must see to it that this agency and all agencies that possess this technology operate within the law and under proper supervision so that we never cross over.....'

Remember, the US was coming out of Vietnam, and the protests of the Sixties, and Nixon and Watergate. It was headed into the Tehran Embassy crisis, a revolution the trillions of dollars of US intelligence never saw coming, and the fall of our buddy in democracy, the Shah. Jimmy Carter took the blame for that, and America launched itself into twenty years of living in a fairy tale world narrated by Ronald Reagan, followed by ten years of fear happily stoked by the very people who'd sold America the fairy-tale Kool-Aid in the first place.

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<sup>1</sup> Officially the United States Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities. See <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church\\_Committee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_Committee)>.

When people talk about the legacy of the 'Vietnam Syndrome' which is supposedly a fear of using American power to pursue American ideals (sic), they continue to ignore reality, which is that the US has fought an almost continuous series of undeclared wars. The real Vietnam Syndrome is actually that the government no longer asks its citizens to send their sons to do the fighting. Instead it sends professionals and mercenaries to do its fighting. Back home we stage more and more elaborate ceremonies of fealty to the military during our circuses, designed to entice the jobless young as much as comfort the affluent who will never get near combat, then we retreat into the placidity of entertainment while our heroes kill and torture and steal to enrich their masters on our behalf.

This Orwellian (and even Heinleinian) reality was obvious from the first moments 9/11 turned into an invasion of Iraq, but it has been in the cards constantly in my lifetime: the Congressional oversight in the 70s led only to an October Surprise in 1980 and then the Iran-Contra abuses. America's current permanent War Of Terror has led to its losing the last shreds of its moral standing, pissed away when we had most of the world standing with us after 9/11.

Senator Feinstein may have got the report out into the public before Mitch McConnell took over the Senate and buried it, but Senator Feinstein refuses to even call torture by its name. Senator Feinstein has fought for additional powers of surveillance for the intelligence establishment over us, and has fought to protect those already caught with their fingers in the digital cookie jar.

This report may seem shocking if your head has been in the sand for the past 13, or 35 years, but it carefully avoids passing the blame upward where it belongs, to those who planned these wars, who sought or prepared the legal briefs for torture, for rendering, for imprisoning without charge. It leaves large swathes of the military and the intelligence establishment outside the CIA untouched: it's like this entire planet-sized sack of shit is finally going to land only on the slick skull of George Tenet. It may leave a stench, but the smell will be localized and isolated, and its wider impact will

dissipate quickly. Just as they did after the reports of the 1970s, the intelligence establishment will continue to do as it damn well pleases. But while the torture report may absolve those who should carry the blame, but it can't absolve the rest of us.

*This originally appeared on Michael Carlson's blog,  
<http://irresistibletargets.blogspot.co.uk/>.*