

Torture's Teachers

By A.J. Langguth

LOS ANGELES — A few months ago, I received some clippings of interviews with a former Federal intelligence agency official. That operative, Jesse Leaf, had been involved with the agency's activities in Iran, and well into the stories Mr. Leaf made some damning accusations.

He said that the C.I.A. sent an operative to teach interrogation methods to SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, that the training included instruction in torture, and the techniques were copied from the Nazis.

Reading through the clippings, I could think of several reasons why the accusations had not been featured prominently. Mr. Leaf could not, or did not, supply the name of the instructor, his victims would be hard to locate; and the testimony from opponents of the Shah would be suspect.

But there is still another reason that I take to be the truest one: We — and I

mean we as Americans — don't believe it. We can read the accusations, even examine the evidence and find it irrefutable. But, in our hearts, we cannot believe that Americans have gone abroad to spread the use of torture.

We can believe that public officials with reputations for brilliance can be arrogant, blind or stupid. Anything but evil. And when the cumulative proof becomes overwhelming that our representative in the C.I.A. or the Agency for International Development police program did in fact teach torture, we excuse ourselves by vilifying the individual men.

This has been on my mind since I returned from Cuba recently. In Havana, I had tried to hunt down a former double agent, a Cuban named Manuel, who was said to have information about United States involvement with torture in Latin America. Manuel had revealed his true sympathies by leaving his job with the C.I.A. in Montevideo and returning to his homeland. But from his editor I learned that Manuel, whose full name turned out to be Manuel Hevia Cosculluela, would be out of the country the entire time I was in Cuba. I could, however, get a copy of the book he had published six

months earlier, "Pasaporte 11333, Eight Years With the C.I.A."

Mr. Hevia had served the C.I.A. in Uruguay's police program. In 1970, his duties brought him in contact with Dan Mitrione, the United States police adviser who was kidnapped by the Tupamaro revolutionaries later that year and shot to death when the Uruguayan Government refused to save him by yielding up political prisoners.

Mr. Mitrione has become notorious throughout Latin America. But few men ever had the chance to sit with him and discuss his rationale for torture. Mr. Hevia had once.

Now, reading Mr. Hevia's version, which I believe to be accurate, I see that I too had resisted acknowledging how drastically a man's career can deform him. I was aware that Mr. Mitrione knew of the tortures and condoned them. That was bad enough. I could not believe even worse of a family man. A Midwesterner. An American.

Thanks to Mr. Hevia, I was finally hearing Mr. Mitrione's true voice:

"When you receive a subject, the first thing to do is determine his physical state, his degree of resistance, through a medical examination. A premature death means a failure by the technician.

"Another important thing to know is exactly how far you can go given the political situation and the personality of the prisoner. It is very important to know beforehand whether we have the luxury of letting the subject die . . .

"Before all else, you must be efficient. You must cause only the damage that is strictly necessary, not a bit more. We must control our tempers in any case. You have to act with the efficiency and cleanliness of a surgeon and with the perfection of an artist . . .

A few months later, Mr. Mitrione paid with his life for those excesses. Five years later, thanks to the effort of such men as former Senator James Abourezk, the police advisory program was finally abolished.

But few of the accomplices in torture have ever been called to account. Years ago in open hearings, Senator Frank Church tried to force some admissions but his witnesses sidestepped his staff's sketchy allegations. Given the willingness of Congress to accept the C.I.A.'s alibis about national security, I don't think any other public hearings would fare better.

But neither Jimmy Carter nor Adm. Stansfield Turner, the Director of Central Intelligence, is implicated in those past cruelties, and the President should call on Admiral Turner for a complete internal investigation and a full report. If he wants Vice President Mondale to oversee the effort, all the better. They can start with Operation Bandierantes in São Paulo, Brazil, continue with Manuel Hevia's expose of practices in Uruguay, and then move on to Chile, Iran and Southeast Asia.

If, at the end, the President can assure us that no American who taught or condoned torture is still working for the C.I.A. or any other agency of the Government, I know that at least we will want to believe him.

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