

The Meaning of Torture

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, May 29—The use of torture as a political instrument is an evil beyond justification or compromise, a practice officially condemned by every civilized society. Yet it goes on, in many places around the world, and arousing people's interest in the subject is singularly difficult. Perhaps we find the reality so unbearable that we turn away rather than contemplate it.

Such thoughts are provoked by fresh reports on the savagery practiced by the military junta in Chile. Evidence of torture in Chile has been published by, among many others, Amnesty International, the highly-respected group that favors no ideology except humanity. Amnesty's findings are summarized with telling simplicity in an article by Rose Styron in *The New York Review of Books*.

Victor Jara, a folk singer, was held with thousands of others in a Santiago sports stadium. He was given a guitar and ordered to play. As he did, the guards broke his fingers, then cut them off. He began to sing, and they beat and then shot him. Several witnesses have described that death. It is a relatively mild example of what Mrs. Styron relates.

Many reports tell of the use of electric shock to make prisoners "confess" to what their captors desire. Sexual assault is a common theme. Mrs. Styron mentions a women's prison, Casa de Mujeres el Buen Pastor, where young girls are sent from prison camps, pregnant, "with their hair pulled out and their nipples and genitals badly burned."

At least one complaint of such treatment has been made officially in the Chilean courts. Mrs. Virginia Ayress complained that her daughter, Luz de las Nieves Ayress, had been beaten, sexually abused, tortured with electric currents and—in a scene right out of "Nineteen Eighty-four"—had rats and spiders put on and into her body. The courts forwarded the complaint to the armed forces.

People are arrested, tortured and summarily killed in Chile for any reason or no reason. Large numbers of doctors have been arrested, some because they did not join in a strike last summer against the leftist Government of Dr. Salvador Allende. Amnesty has an appeal from Chilean doctors saying that 85 of their profession are in prison, held without any charges; another 65 are said to have been shot or died of torture or untreated wounds.

Last month the 28 Roman Catholic bishops of Chile, in an unusual public statement, condemned the practice of torture and arbitrary arrest. The junta routinely denies torture reports or, in the words of its Interior Minister, Gen. Oscar Bonilla, dismisses them as

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"damaging to the national interest."

But what has all this to do with the United States? Secretary of State Kissinger has told us that this country cannot reform the internal policies of other governments. As a generality that is fair enough. But it is not enough when we have a share of responsibility.

However much the Allende Government contributed to its own downfall, the United States made things worse by cutting essential economic assistance—except to the Chilean military. Since the coup, Washington has given strong support to the military regime. Unlike other Western countries, we have offered no asylum to Chilean refugees. And we have said nothing, officially, about the murder and savagery.

Words would matter in this instance. If the United States spoke out against the torture, if our Embassy in Santiago was active in watching the trials and other visible manifestations of oppression, if more American lawyers joined international legal groups in protesting the junta's lawlessness, if Congress moved to attach conditions to aid, those who rule Chile would almost certainly listen.

But the present Government of the United States shows no concern for human rights. Henry Kissinger and his President were silent for months while their allies in Pakistan slaughtered the Bengalis. Washington has nothing to say about a Greek Government that rules by terror. Or about the Government of South Korea, whose kidnappings and brutalities make Communist regimes look almost decorous by comparison. (For a student to refuse to attend class in South Korea "without plausible reasons" is a crime punishable by death.)

Some of the nastiest governments in the world today were born or grew with American aid. That being the case, the most modest view of our responsibility would require us to say a restraining word to them occasionally. But we say nothing, we hear nothing, we see nothing.

There was a wonderful example the other day—funny if it did not involve so much suffering. The State Department said it knew of no political prisoners in South Vietnam, because Saigon's stated policy "does not permit the arrest of anyone for mere political dissent." Thus the thousands of non-Communists in South Vietnamese jails were made to vanish, the twisted creatures in tiger cages waved away. Thus the idealism that once marked America's place in the world has become indifference in the face of inhumanity.