

# Torture as an Institution

By JAMES BECKET

GENEVA—I have just learned that a friend, Stephanos Pandelakis, a Greek pediatrician, has been tortured. For nine days after his arrest in Athens in April, no one knew where he was. He was alternately kept in a dark hole and beaten, which he was able to stand, and then tortured with electricity which he was not able to stand.

Because I know him, my personal anguish is immediate and overwhelming. Yet Stephanos is only one of thousands of victims of a practice that seems to have erupted around the world—the use of torture by governments as a means of governing.

Whether the methods be modern, as in the mental asylums of the U.S.S.R. or primitive as in the torture chambers of Brazil, torture has become institutionalized, its practitioners generally members of the military and security forces, part of the state administration. This phenomenon is something other than the excesses of individual police officers known to every country, or the mass atrocities of wars like Algeria and Vietnam; it is the deliberate and systematic use of torture against the citizen who is believed to oppose the state.

Torture as an open means to preserve a ruling system is not new in history, one need only recall the Inquisition or the torture of slaves in ancient Greece and Rome. However, over the last two centuries a consensus against torture grew up, finding international expression in Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

A climate was created where at least the torturer felt compelled to deny it. But today reports of torture

come from every quarter. One day we read about the burning "metal table" in Iran and the trials where the only evidence are the confessions of those to be executed; another day it is Uruguay where the recent discovery of a judicious blend of physical torture and "truth drugs" has produced spectacular results, or Northern Ireland where the British Army employs the same refined techniques it used in Cyprus and Aden.

Some argue that this development in the 1960's was the justified response to terrorism, to the violent apostles of Guevara and Marighella. Yet in the majority of cases torture preceded the urban guerrilla. The Greek colonels used it from the first day of their coup, it was used in Algeria long before the F.L.N., it was used in Brazil from 1965 on, in Russia where the dissenters are nonviolent, in Turkey it was used before the first kidnapping. In most cases, state terrorism preceded opposition terrorism.

In looking for the reason for its

growing use, the essential point is that torture is politically very effective, particularly for those who govern without the consent of the governed. Those who condemn torture on practical grounds, "there are better ways to get information," miss its major political use, which is not to gain information, but to neutralize the majority of the population. If the state sets torture as the price of dissent, the rulers can be assured that only a small minority will react. This minority can then be isolated and the repressive power of the state concentrated on it. The human tragedy is that this minority generally includes the most idealistic and generous spirits of the society who feel the moral obligation

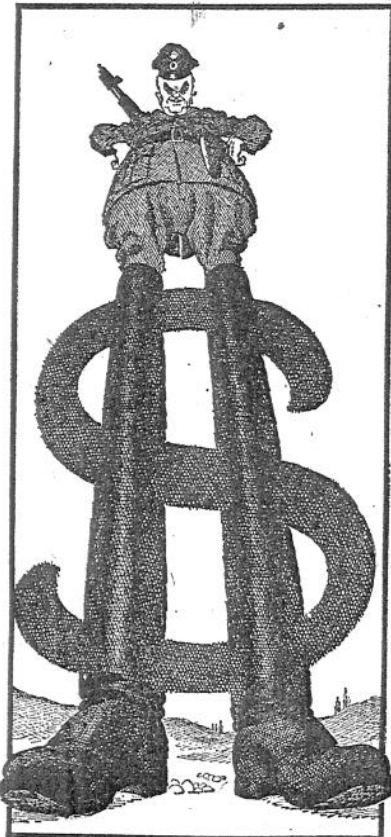
to resist a system part of which is based on torture.

What is most bitter for the victim is his helplessness. There is no international protection of human rights, the Universal Declaration is only that, the U.N. Human Rights Commission is a mockery, and the one regional system that has some power, the European Convention on Human Rights, was employed in the case of

Greece. The regime was found guilty of torture and ostracized from the Council of Europe. This has hardly helped Dr. Pandelakis.

Although we Americans are tired of being blamed for the ills of this world, it is valid to raise the question of why so many of our client states, the Greeces, the Brazils, the Portugals of our world use these methods as an administrative practice. There is the unfortunate coincidence that a number of the torturers have received police training in the U.S. under A.I.D. programs. While it is impossible to believe that foreigners would be taught methods of torture in the U.S., one would also have thought it impossible that those who wield real economic and political power in this country would not condemn these practices. And yet we see the Rockefellers attack a New York television station for showing a film about torture in Brazil rather than condemn the practice in Brazil, and we see Mr. Nixon's Administration embrace the Shah of Iran, Premier Papadopoulos and the Brazilian generals rather than rap them on the knuckles.

Perhaps the most depressing side of these depressing developments is the attitude of public opinion. The public seems to have lost its capacity to be shocked, responding with indifference and even signs of acceptance. Surely this would be one issue on which mankind could continue to agree, at least on the principle. Torture is the ultimate corruption, the grossest denial of man's humanity, and its use never justified.



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