

# Torture and Blubber

6-30-71  
N-IT

By KURT VONNEGUT Jr.

WEST BARNSTABLE, Mass.—When I was a young reader of Robin Hood tales and "The White Company" by Arthur Conan Doyle and so on, I came across the verb "blubber" so often that I looked it up. Bad people in the stories did it when good people punished them hard. It means, of course, to weep noisily and without constraint. No good person in a story ever did that.

But it is not easy in real life to make a healthy man blubber, no matter how wicked he may be. So good men have invented appliances which make unconstrained weeping easier—the rack, the boot, the iron maiden, the pediwinkis, the electric chair, the cross, the thumbscrew. And the thumbscrew is alluded to in the published parts of the secret Pentagon history of the Vietnam war. The late Assistant Secretary of Defense, John McNaughton, speaks of each bombing of the North as "... one more turn of the screw."

Simply: we are torturers, and we once hoped to win in Indochina and anywhere because we had the most expensive torture instruments yet devised. I am reminded of the Spanish Armada, whose ships had torture-chambers in their holds. Protestant Englishmen were going to be forced to blubber.

The Englishmen refused.

Now the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong have refused. Plenty of them have blubbered like crazy as individuals, God knows—when splattered with jellied gasoline, when peppered with white phosphorus, when crammed into tiger cages and sprinkled with lime. But their societies fight on.

Agony never made a society quit fighting, as far as I know. A society has to be captured or killed — or offered things it values. While Germany was being tortured during the Second World War, with justice, may I add, its industrial output and the

determination of its people increased. Hitler, according to Albert Speer, couldn't even be bothered with marveling at the ruins or comforting the survivors. The Biafrans were tortured simultaneously by Nigerians, Russians and British. Their children starved to death. The adults were skeletons. But they fought on.

One wonders now where our leaders got the idea that mass torture would work to our advantage in Indochina. It never worked anywhere else. They got the idea from childish fiction, I think, and from a childish awe of torture.

Children talk about tortures a lot. They often make up what they hope are new ones. I can remember a friend's saying to me when I was a child: "You want to hear a really neat torture?" The other day I heard a child say to another: "You want to hear a really cool torture?" And then an impossibly complicated engine of pain was described. A cross would be cheaper, and work better, too.

But children believe that pain is an effective way of controlling people, which it isn't—except in a localized, short-term sense. They believe that pain can change minds, which it can't. Now the secret Pentagon history reveals that plenty of high-powered American adults think so, too, some of them college professors. Shame on them for their ignorance.

Torture from the air was the only military scheme open to us, I suppose, since the extermination or capture of the North Vietnamese people would have started World War III. In which case, we would have been tortured from the air.

I am sorry we tried torture. I am sorry we tried anything. I hope we will never try torture again. It doesn't work. Human beings are stubborn and brave animals everywhere. They can endure amazing amounts of pain, if they have to. The North Vietnamese and the Vietcong have had to.

Good show.

The American armada to Indochina has been as narrow-minded and futile as the Spanish Armada to England was, though effectively more cruel. Only 27,000 men were involved in the Spanish fiasco. We are said to have more dope addicts than that in Vietnam. Hail, Victory.

Never mind who the American equivalent of Spain's Philip II was. Never mind who lied. Everybody should shut up for a while. Let there be deathly silence as our armada sails home.



Kurt Vonnegut Jr. is the author of "Slaughterhouse-Five," "Cat's Cradle" and other novels.