

***Guantánamospeak* and the Manufacture of Consent**

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For those who stubbornly seek freedom around the world, there can be no more urgent task than to come to understand the mechanisms and practices of indoctrination. . . . Propaganda is to democracy what violence is to totalitarianism.

—Noam Chomsky

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Much has been made about prisoner abuse at Guantánamo. And rightly so: Guantánamo is an ongoing crime against humanity. If you don't believe me, take a look at The Guantánamo Testimonials Project we have been carrying out at this campus. But even though a lot has been said, there and elsewhere, about *prisoner* abuse at Guantánamo, relatively little has been said about *language* abuse at the Cuban base. Yet, there has been a lot of it. And we need to talk about it. If only because prisoner abuse is *enabled* by language abuse.

Abusing a human being is not easy to do; consenting to do it is not something that comes naturally. As a matter of fact, the consent to abuse a fellow human being is something that needs to be *manufactured*.¹ It needs to be built. Like a house. Brick by brick and room by room.

How was this *consent to abuse* manufactured at Guantánamo? First

you instill fear. You say that Guantánamo holds vicious criminals that would not hesitate to chew on hydraulic tubes to bring an airplane down. Then you cultivate hatred. You say that each and every one of the individuals detained at the base was personally responsible for 9/11. Then you abuse language; you engage in what Orwell would call *Guantánamospeak*. It is this third step that I want to focus on today.

The abuse of language at Guantánamo began by coining the term *war on terror*. A war is something that threatens the very survival of a nation. Consequently, no citizen of that nation can be against it. Except for the traitors who seek the destruction of their own nation. But is terrorism something that threatens the survival of our nation? It can lead to massive loss of life, as 9/11 did. And it can be a crime against humanity, as 9/11 was. But *threaten the survival of a nation*? Wars are events that have only two natural outcomes: victory or defeat. Consequently, if you do not root for victory, you are rooting for defeat. Only a traitor can root for defeat.

But casting our response to 9/11 in terms of a war creates a linguistic problem. What would you call someone you capture in that war? *Prisoner of war*? This would be extremely problematic, as prisoners of war have rights under the Geneva Conventions, one of them being the right to be free from coercive interrogation. But interrogate coercively is something our government very much wanted to do with these captives. So we called them *detainees* instead of *prisoners*. This has an added rhetorical advantage: it makes imprisonment at Guantánamo sound like a minor inconvenience—like being detained by traffic. *So we should consent to that.*

By the way, the verb *capture* is already loaded. Being captured is what happens to fugitives, possibly of justice, and hence to criminals. Never mind that some of the individuals held at Guantánamo were *captured* in their homes with their families. Or fleeing carpet bombing. Or coming out of a courthouse that had just cleared them from charges of terrorism. Or were handed to us by local militias in exchange for bounties—a practice that might be called *human trafficking* in legal circles.

Alternatively, Guantánamo prisoners may be called *enemy combatants*. This reinforces the context of war, and hence the survival of the nation. But mention of *war* again brings about the term of *prisoner*

of war. So we should clarify the term enemy combatant and speak of *unprivileged* enemy combatants. Adding the adjective *unprivileged* manages to turn the *rights* of the Geneva Conventions into *privileges*. Privileges are things that are granted by the grace of a legitimate authority. Rights are something you have regardless of the generosity of the powers that be. Rights are something powers can no more grant than they can withhold.

And just for the record: Guantánamo prisoners *have* rights under the Geneva Conventions. Everyone held in an armed conflict is protected by these conventions. The fact that some captives did not wear uniforms only means that they do not have the rights Geneva grants to combatants. They would still have the rights granted to civilians. For civilians *are* protected by the Geneva Conventions as well as combatants. I should add that thinking that the Guantánamo prisoners are in fact protected by the Geneva Conventions is not my interpretation; it is the interpretation of the International Committee of the Red Cross, which is the accepted arbiter for the implementation of the Geneva Conventions. It is the organization the signatories of the Conventions, the United States included, have agreed to abide by.

But we digress. Let's return to *Guantánamospeak*.

Guantánamo prisoners are being coercively interrogated. This, of course, is not what it is called. That may enable dissent. In Guantánamo, when you are taken from your cell in order to be interrogated, you are said to be making good on *a reservation*. Or to be going for *an interview*. So being interrogated is like going to a restaurant. Or applying for a job. Nothing to dissent about there.

Interestingly, language does not always take the abuse lying down; sometimes, it fights back. Guantánamo personnel may say, for example, that so-and-so is *going to reservation*, a phrase that we would never use for making good on a reservation made at a restaurant (and betrays the attempt to veil the reference to interrogations, which are something one *would* "go to").

As has been thoroughly reported, interrogations at Guantánamo can be brutal. They may involve beatings, sleep deprivation, solitary confinement, exposure to temperature extremes, blaring noise, painful binding, and threats of death or harm to self or to others. Such practices are what independent observers call *torture*. But they cannot

be called that in Guantánamo. That would sow the seeds of dissent. There, these practices are collectively referred to as procedures of *enhanced interrogation* instead. Interrogation is acceptable in a criminal setting, i.e. given legal protections. So what is wrong with enhancing an acceptable procedure? We should consent to it.

Each one of the aforementioned forms of torture has its own special entry in the dictionary of *Guantánamospeak*. Food deprivation is called *dietary manipulation*—a lapse, perhaps, as manipulation often refers to less-than-legitimate doings (language fights back again). Sleep deprivation is called *sleep management* (nothing wrong with managing sleep, is there? After all, you do not want to be a slouch). Under one of the modalities of sleep management, a prisoner can be moved, almost continuously from one cell to another for weeks. This involves full bodily searches, gatherings of belongings, three-chain shackling, marching from one cell to another, and unshackling. This is done around the clock for weeks, and as a consequence the prisoner is unable to sleep for more than one hour at a time. This form of sleep deprivation is referred to as the *frequent flyer program*—so the movement from cell to cell is to be thought of as the benefits program one gets from an airline by traveling a lot with it. This is supposed to be funny. The program is also called *Operation Sandman*, thus making a perverse reference to the nursery rhyme used to put children to sleep—and acknowledging, via sarcasm, the real purpose of the exercise.

The most common form of beating in Guantánamo comes in the context of forced cell removals. Suppose a noncompliant prisoner refuses to go to interrogation (or to make good on a reservation he never made). An Immediate Reaction Force is called in. An Immediate Reaction Force is a team of six guards in full riot gear that march into a cell, pepper spray the prisoner (some of you may know about this first-hand). . . . In any event, they pepper spray the prisoner, charge on him, slam him onto the ground, beat him up badly, hog-tie him, and take him wherever he needs to be—which, at that point, is usually the infirmary.

Interestingly, these events are called *irfs* (based on the acronym for Immediate Reaction Force), and the action itself is called an *irfing*. *Irf* is a new word of American English. But we didn't need it. We already

had a term for that. It would be *aggravated battery*. But that phrase, of course, would sow dissent, and cannot be used.

Beyond aggravated battery, three-chain shackling (on wrists, ankles, and waist) is referred to as *wearing a three-piece suit*, thus making light of excessive binding by reference to an elegant suit of clothes. To *soften up a hardened terrorist* in reservation, the prisoner is made to squat on the floor over a metal eye-ring, to which he is painfully chained from his wrists and ankles. This is called a *stress position*, stress being an unavoidable feature of modern life. Independent observers might call that *binding torture* instead. Then, if all else fails, a prisoner is threatened with being taken to a country where he can be physically abused (beaten, electroshocked, cut, suffocated, or burned). This is a practice of *torture by proxy* from which we can remove ourselves linguistically by appealing to the aseptic term *extraordinary rendition*. Language is used here to conceal reality rather than to reveal it.

But the most common form of torture associated with the war on terror is waterboarding. Being a widespread form of torture, waterboarding goes under myriad names the world over. It is not certain that waterboarding actually happened at Guantánamo. But other forms of controlled suffocation (*dryboarding*) have been proposed as explanations for the first three deaths in custody at the base. The one pertinent testimony we have about actual waterboarding has reached us anonymously, allegedly from a guard, who said the practice happened *all the time* at Guantánamo, where it was not called *waterboarding* but *drown-proofing*. As if prisoners were being protected from drowning—which I guess is true. Except that it is we who are causing the drowning. And the protection is only from the natural outcome of drowning: death. And only to prolong the agony of the victim.

Incidentally, waterboarding is sometimes described as *simulated drowning*. Or as a procedure that induces the *misperception of drowning*. This is inaccurate and misleading. It is inaccurate because waterboarding is not simulated drowning; it is actual drowning. Only that it is controlled so as to prevent death and thus prolong the agony. *Controlled drowning* would therefore be closer to the mark. Describing waterboarding as *simulated drowning* is also misleading, as it suggests that the problem with waterboarding is *deception*—which would be no problem at all; deception is a perfectly legal interrogation tactic.

In 2004, the Supreme Court dealt the first of three blows to Guantánamo. It ruled that prisoners had to be given a semblance of their day in court. What they got was significantly less than a semblance. They got a farce. They were subjected to so-called Combatant Status Review Tribunals (CSRTs). They were called *tribunals* in order to say that the ruling of the Supreme Court was followed. But they were nothing like a real American tribunal. First, the prisoners were not allowed a lawyer, only a *personal representative*. And that representative was a member of the military. Consequently, the representative had the same employer as the prosecution. The tribunal took place before a panel of three judges. They too were members of the military, as was the “court of appeals” that could overturn the decisions of these tribunals.

As if this were not enough, the prisoner could be tried on secret evidence, so there was no way he could defend himself properly. Hearsay was admitted into the record as well. And the evidence brought about by the prosecution could not be questioned. It had to be taken as fact. This asymmetry between the claims of the prosecution and those of the defense can be traced linguistically in the transcripts of the CSRTs. The allegations of the prisoner are described as such by appealing to verbs of saying (what are known in the trade as *verba dicendi*). *Verba dicendi* are verbs like *says*, *alleges*, *claims*. Crucially, however, the charges of the prosecution are mentioned straight up without such verbs. The impression you therefore get is not one of a conflict between charges and refutations, but one of a clash between facts and counterclaims. The former breeds dissent; the latter, consent.

The outcomes of the CSRTs were also interesting specimens of *Guantánamospeak*. The verdicts of these tribunals were not, as one may expect, innocence or guilt. No; they were “*still* an enemy combatant” or “*no longer* an enemy combatant.” For, finding that a prisoner was *not* an enemy combatant would question the original evidence supporting his capture. It would also raise the possibility that he was imprisoned without cause in the first place. But that would detract from the consent being manufactured.

Amazingly, in remarkably few cases, and in spite of having the cards stacked squarely against him, a prisoner could be ruled to be no longer an enemy combatant. At which point, the “court of appeals,”

which, as we said, was also employed by the military, convened a new tribunal to review the results. Such revised tribunals invariably reversed the ruling of the first tribunals, and found the prisoners to be correctly designated as enemy combatants after all. Interestingly, these new tribunals were called *reconvened tribunals*. As if the original tribunal had just taken a break for lunch and “reconvened” afterwards. Never mind that the new tribunal had an entirely different panel of judges, was allegedly handed new evidence, and reached the opposite verdict than the old one.

One of the constant fears in Guantánamo is that the prisoners would commit suicide (prison suicides reflect poorly on prisoner treatment). So suicides are linguistically impossible in Guantánamo. According to the prison manuals that have been made public, what we have there can only be described as *self-harm gestures*—like slapping your forehead or biting your fingernails, I suppose.

Hunger strikes are linguistically impossible in Guantánamo as well. Like prison suicides, prison hunger strikes are signs of poor conditions at the prison. Thus, what the Guantánamo manuals prescribe is the use, not of hunger strikes, but only of *total voluntary fasts*. This contorted Orwellian idiom removes hunger strikes from the realm of protest and transfers them into the realm of religious beliefs (the prisoners are religious fanatics anyway). And into the realm of free, voluntary activity, the existence of which would actually reflect well on the prison.

Incidentally, I mentioned that some Guantánamo manuals have been made public, thanks to the transparency organization WikiLeaks. This is no small matter, given the amount of censorship that clouds the base. Once again, censorship (which is unbecoming to a democracy) is called *secrecy*—an admissible practice in wartime. It is also called *redaction* when it is applied to a document. But to *redact* a document means to *write it* (or used to mean as much before the war on terror). By co-opting the term *redaction*, censorship vanishes into the very creation of the document; it becomes inevitable, and, hence, acceptable.

More than 600 of the 779 individuals who have been imprisoned at Guantánamo at one time or another have been released. A few of them went on to engage in hostilities against the United States or

their interests (exactly how few is in dispute). This has been described as *recidivism*. Or as *returning to the battlefield*. Even if their captors never claimed that the so-called battlefield returnees had ever been in a battlefield in the first place. The possibility that these individuals were actually retaliating for the torture they endured at Guantánamo is seldom raised. For that would suggest that some of the violence we endure is the result of the violence we inflict.

Consenting to abuse a fellow human being is not something that happens naturally; it is something that needs to be *manufactured*.

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Note

1. Walter Lippmann coined the term *the manufacture of consent* in his 1921 book *Public Opinion* (see Chapter XV). According to Lippmann, the manufacture of consent was a form of propaganda that the *élite* had to unleash on the unenlightened masses of a modern democracy. Subsequently, Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman used the term in the title to a book they published in 1988. In *Manufacturing Consent*, they revealed the way in which the profit motive corrupts the mainstream media into manufacturing consent. The term *Guantánamospeak* is based on the term *Newspeak* that George Orwell coined in his book 1984. The epigraph to this paper was taken from “Propaganda, American-style,” an article that is available online at zpub.com/un/chomsky.