

The Truth About Torture

A historian in the future, or a moralist, is likely to deem the Bush administration's enthusiasm for torture the most striking aspect of its war against terrorism.

This started early. Proposals to authorize torture were circulating even before there was anyone to torture. Days after the Sept. 11 attacks, the administration made it known that the U.S. was no longer bound by international treaties or by American law and established U.S. military standards concerning torture and the treatment of prisoners. By the end of 2001, the Justice Department had drafted memos on how to protect military and intelligence officers from eventual prosecution under existing U.S. law for their treatment of Afghan and other prisoners.

In January 2002, the White House counsel, Alberto Gonzales, who is soon to become attorney general, advised George W. Bush that it could be done by fiat. If the president simply declared "detainees" in Afghanistan outside the protection of the Geneva Conventions, the 1996 U.S. War Crimes Act—which carries a possible death penalty for Geneva violations—would not apply.

Those who protested were ignored, though the administration declared it would abide by the "spirit" of the conventions. Shortly afterward, the CIA asked for formal assurance that this pledge did not apply to its agents.

In March 2003, a Defense Department legal task force concluded that the president was not bound by any international or federal law on torture. It said that as commander in chief, he had the authority "to approve any technique needed to protect the nation's security."

Subsequent legal memos to civilian officials in the White House and Pentagon dwelt in morbid detail on permitted torture techniques, for practical purposes concluding that anything was permitted that did not (deliberately) kill the victim.

What is this all about? The FBI, the armed forces' own legal officers, bar associations, and other civil-law groups have protested, as have retired intelligence officers and civilian law-enforcement officials.

The United States has never before officially practiced torture. It was not deemed necessary in order to defeat Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan. Its indirect costs are enormous in their effect on the national reputation, their alienation of international opinion, and their corruption of the morale and morality of the American military and intelligence services.

Torture doesn't even work that well. An indignant FBI witness of what has gone on at the Guantanamo prison camp says that "simple investigative techniques" could produce much information the Army is trying to obtain through torture.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Bush administration is not torturing prisoners because it is useful but because of its symbolism. It originally was intended to be a form of what later, in the attack on Iraq, came to be called "shock and awe." It was meant as intimidation. We will do these terrible things to demonstrate that nothing will stop us

from conquering our enemies. We are indifferent to world opinion. We will stop at nothing.

In that respect, it is like the attack on Fallujah last November, which—destructive as it was—was fundamentally a symbolic operation. Any insurgent who wanted to escape could do so long before the much-advertised attack actually began. Its real purpose was exemplary destruction: to deliver a message to all of Iraq that this is what the United States can do to you if you continue the resistance. It was collective punishment of the city's occupants for having tolerated terrorist operations based there.

The administration's obsession with shock and awe is a result of its misunderstanding of the war it is fighting, which is political and not military. America's dilemma is a very old one.

It is dealing with politically motivated revolutionaries in the case of al-Qaeda and nationalist and sectarian insurgents in the case of Iraq. It has a conventional army, good for crushing cities. But the enemy is not interested in occupying cities or defeating American armies. Its war is for the minds of Muslims.

Destroying cities and torturing prisoners are things you do when you are losing the real war, the war your enemies are fighting. They are signals of moral bankruptcy. They destroy the confidence and respect of your friends, and reinforce the credibility of the enemy. ■

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Arts & Letters

FILM

[*Hotel Rwanda*]

Lessons in Majority Rule

By Steve Sailer

AS AMERICA STRIVES to prod Iraq to “democracy,” which President Bush defines as sugar and spice and everything nice (such as protection of minority rights), “Hotel Rwanda” could serve as a timely reminder that long-oppressed peoples, like the Hutus in Rwanda (and perhaps the Shi’ites in Iraq), generally assume the word means majority rule. And what the Hutu majority wanted was vengeance on their traditional rulers, the Tutsis.

Not that you’ll learn much from “Hotel Rwanda” itself. Its script methodically excludes any insights into why Hutu mobs butchered at least a half million Tutsis and moderate Hutus in the spring of 1994.

No, the reason to see this solidly made little movie is Don Cheadle’s subtle performance as Paul Rusesabagina, the suave Hutu manager of Rwanda’s finest hotel, who saved 1,286 refugees through *Schindler’s List*-style subterfuges.

Cheadle has been to film acting what Dave Chappelle was to television comedy—the man who had been The Next Big Thing for so long he was becoming a joke. “Hotel Rwanda” won’t make Cheadle a matinee idol—the topic is too foreboding—but it finally gives him the character lead he deserves.

Further, “Hotel Rwanda” is less depressing than it sounds, offering one of the few Rwandan stories with a happy ending. Onscreen gore is minimized, allowing the film a PG-13 rating.

Unfortunately, the screenplay aims at self-absorbed white liberals who think all Africans look alike and that white racism is the root of all evil. The script even claims that it’s merely a white myth that Tutsis tend to be taller than Hutus, asserting that the Belgian imperialists arbitrarily assigned those identities to random Rwandans. Yet soon the Hutu Power radio station is broadcasting the prearranged code to begin exterminating the Tutsis: “Cut down the tall trees.”

Rwanda’s true history is more instructive. The medium-height Bantu Hutu farmers arrived 2,000 years ago and drove the pygmoid hunter-gatherer Twa into the forests. Then about the time of Cortez, the tall, slender Tutsi herdsmen invaded from the north and, according to Gary Brecher, the acerbic War Nerd columnist, “claimed all the land, on the legal basis that if you objected they’d kill you.”

The Tutsi rulers treated the Hutu peasantry with the same contempt the Norman lords display toward the Saxon yeomen in Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*. Commenting on Rwanda’s “indigenous racism,” Congo-born sociologist Pierre L. van den Berghe reported that the Tutsis, like other aristocracies, saw themselves as “astute in political intrigue, born to command, refined, courageous, and cruel.”

The Tutsi ascendancy resembled the white pre-eminence in Latin America. Inter-marriage was frequent, yet physical differences between the classes endured, just as they have in Mexico, where despite five centuries of intermarrying, the elite remains much taller and

fairer than the masses. The trick is that Mexico’s most successful short, dark men often wed tall, blonde women and have more European-looking offspring, thus replenishing the caste system. Likewise, in “Hotel Rwanda,” Cheadle’s ultra-competent Hutu executive is married to a Tutsi beauty who is taller and fairer than he is.

Prudent imperialists divide and rule, employing as their local surrogates a well-organized minority like the Tutsis in Belgian Rwanda or the Sunnis in British Iraq. In contrast, the Bush administration disbanded the Sunni-run Iraqi Army on the advice of Shi’ite exile Ahmad Chalabi. Many Sunnis decided to fight rather than let us give the whip hand to the Shi’ites, whose hatred they had long provoked.

When the Belgians went home in 1962, the Hutus voted themselves into power and began persecuting their ex-overlords. Many Tutsis fled to Uganda, from which their sons invaded Rwanda in 1990. Rather like the French Revolutionaries guillotining the aristocrats in response to the old order’s attack on France in 1792, fearful Hutu extremists decided upon a final solution.

“Hotel Rwanda” blames white racism for the fecklessness of the United Nations’ response to the genocide but fails to mention that the head of the UN’s peacekeeping operations who gave the disastrous order not to fight to the 2,500 UN soldiers under Canadian Gen. Romeo Dallaire (played by Nick Nolte) was Kofi Annan, who is probably not a white racist.

Nor do we see that the Tutsi rebel army leader, current President Paul Kagame, opposed outside pacification. He preferred that his fellow Tutsis die while he conquered Rwanda, thus ending the experiment in rule by the Hutu majority. ■