

PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

April 28, 2014

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel
1400 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Mr. Secretary:

As an organization of health professionals dedicated to human rights advocacy, Psychologists for Social Responsibility strongly objects to practices that violate the ethics of health professions and lie outside the norms of international law and practice. The recent Report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence confirms that, beginning during the Bush Administration, interrogation and detention practices were put in place by the CIA that constituted torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Practices once condemned under law and international treaty were soon redefined by the Justice Department to permit a “culture of torture” to proliferate under U.S. policy. These practices quickly spread to the detention centers of the Department of Defense and throughout the theaters of war. While legal progress has been made to limit these policies and practices, significant remnants remain under your authority. We write to you today to urge you to eliminate all existing procedures allowing for torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of detainees.

In 2009, via Executive Order 13491, your administration officially announced its intention to end the torture practices developed and instituted under the Bush Administration. Interrogation practices that did not conform to the Army Field Manual were abolished. However, as documented by numerous legal and human rights groups, as well as by former interrogators,¹ the Army Field Manual still includes abusive techniques in violation of these standards.

We concur with the recent recommendation of the Institute on Medicine as a Profession (IMAP)/Open Society Foundations report² calling for you to issue a new executive order banning interrogation techniques using isolation, sleep deprivation, exploitation of fear, and other methods that violate international standards regarding torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment. We, too, urge you to remediate the ethical standards of the Army Field Manual via executive order.

The current edition of the Army Field Manual (2006) officially supports interrogations using “approach techniques,” including the creation, manipulation, and intensification of phobias and fears in prisoners (“Fear Up”) and the calculated psychological attack against ego or self-esteem (“Emotional

¹ Scott Horton, “Interrogators Call for the Elimination of Appendix M,” Harpers Magazine, Nov. 16, 2010. URL: <http://harpers.org/blog/2010/11/interrogators-call-for-the-elimination-of-appendix-m/>

² Ethics Abandoned: Medical Professionalism and Detainee Abuse in the “War on Terror”, IMAP/OSF Task Force Report, Nov. 2013. URL: <http://www.imapny.org/File%20Library/Documents/IMAP-EthicsTextFinal2.pdf>

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Pride and Ego Down”). The “Emotional Futility” approach intends to create a perception in a prisoner that “resistance to questioning is futile.” The manual describes the purpose of this technique as engendering “a feeling of hopelessness and helplessness” in a detainee and notes the “potential for application of the pride and ego approach to cross the line into humiliating and degrading treatment of the detainee.”

Also problematic on both basic health and human rights grounds is Appendix M, added to this most recent version of the Army Field Manual (2-22.3). This special annex proposes a technique known as “Separation,” which includes the use of solitary confinement, sleep deprivation, forms of sensory deprivation, and environmental manipulations – all of which could theoretically be extended indefinitely – as ostensibly legitimate forms of treatment on “unlawful combatants.” The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture³ and independent human rights organizations describe such practices as torture and/or cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment. As health professionals and human rights advocates, we are disturbed that such techniques are conducted under an official capacity and by executive order.

We are particularly concerned that health professionals, including psychologists, have been engaged to support such efforts, directly or indirectly, in violation of their ethical obligations and in violation of the policies of their professional associations.

As you must be aware, these practices are not only cruel, but also yield questionable intelligence and contribute to a perception of our country as a systematic violator of human rights. It would serve as a strong and principled legacy of your Administration if these remaining practices of torture, cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment were finally and definitively ended.

We look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,

Steven Reisner, PhD
President
Psychologists for Social Responsibility

cc: President Barack Obama

³ “Solitary confinement should be banned in most cases, UN expert says,” UN News Centre, Oct. 18th, 2011. URL: <https://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=40097>
