Terrorism and Torture

Terrorism and torture are twin evils that have dominated news headlines – particularly since the horrifying events of 9/11. In this thought-provoking volume, scholars from a diverse range of disciplines examine the complex motivational and situational factors contributing to terrorist acts and state-sponsored torture, and the potential linkage between those two heinous human behaviors. They also consider the strategies that might reduce the threat of future terrorist acts, and the perceived necessity to engage in morally reprehensible – and often illegal – torture practices. With its integrated synthesis of contemporary theories and research on the complex dynamics of the terrorism–torture link, this is an authoritative source for scholars and students of psychology, criminal justice, law, media, communication studies, and political science. It will also appeal to students of other disciplines with an interest in the study of terrorism and torture.

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Terrorism and Torture

An Interdisciplinary Perspective

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A famous quote attributed to F. M. Dostoevsky notes that “while nothing is easier than to denounce the evil-doer, nothing is more difficult than to understand him.” Terrorism and torture are twin evils that have dominated news headlines in the years following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001. As the former ambassador from Pakistan to the United Nations, Ahmad Kamal, observed, the lines between good and evil become blurred when “terrorists” are often defined on the basis of their success or failure; those who succeed become heroes and even heads of state, whereas those who fail are labeled as terrorists (Kamal, 2002). Likewise, while torture is universally denounced by civilized nations as the dark side of evil, working on that “dark side” was considered “vital” by US Vice President Dick Cheney in responding to terrorist threat (Cheney, 2001). Understanding the architects of terror and torture goes beyond the simple differentiation of “you are either with us or against us” (Bush, 2001), and beyond vilification of those (e.g., multiple Grammy award winners The Dixie Chicks) who dare to cast a self-critical eye on the tensions between our own moral principles and amoral actions. Understanding the evil-doer is difficult, not the least because it also involves looking in the mirror and asking who one is, what one does, and how one is perceived by others. Terrorist acts and torture are not simply “evil”; they have knowable causes. This volume aims to illuminate the terrorism–torture link from multiple, interdisciplinary perspectives.

When we embarked on this project, our objective was two-fold. First, we wanted to ask scholars from a diverse range of disciplines to examine the complex factors contributing to terrorist acts and state-sponsored torture, the potential linkage between those two heinous human behaviors, and the strategies that might reduce the threat of terrorist acts and the perceived necessity to engage in morally reprehensible – and often illegal – torture practices. Our second objective was to facilitate an active and spirited dialogue between the contributors to this volume so that we could fruitfully bring to bear the viewpoints and expertise from different domains to a critical analysis of the complex dynamic
between terrorism and torture. To this end, we held in August, 2007, a three-day symposium at the University of Western Australia (UWA) in Perth, during which this group of international scholars forged an inter-disciplinary perspective of the terrorism–torture link.

We would like to acknowledge the valuable contributions made by a number of individuals and organizations in support of this project. Funding was provided by various discipline groups within the UWA, including first and foremost the Institute of Advanced Studies; the Faculty of Life and Physical Sciences; the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; the School of Psychology; the Crime Research Centre (Faculty of Law); and the School of Social and Cultural Studies. We thank Susan Takao and Terri-ann White from the UWA Institute of Advanced Studies for their unwavering support and tremendous efforts in coordinating the Terrorism and Torture Symposium in 2007. We would also like to thank Herb Jurkiewicz for his media support and Melanie Newton for her help with manuscript preparation.

REFERENCES

