

Civilizing Torture: An American Tradition. By W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2018). Pp 416. Hardcover, \$35.00.

At the 2016 DNC, Hilary Clinton reasserted the time-hallowed belief that America occupies a unique moral place in the world: “America is great, because America is good.” Despite the Obama Administration’s cessation of enhanced interrogation in 2009, the long history of torture in the United States belies the logic of such proclamations. W. Fitzhugh Brundage’s study of torture throughout American history, from the sixteenth century to the present day, provides a sharp rebuke to claims of national innocence. *Civilizing Torture: An American Tradition* represents the most methodical and thoughtful examination of the history of American torture to date. *Civilizing Torture* builds on Edward Peters and Darius Rejali’s global studies of torture, adding a distinctly national and discourse-oriented narrative to the field.

Throughout his analysis – from his description of European colonization to his analysis of extreme police violence in Chicago – Brundage highlights how American governments and state officials have consistently marginalized acts of cruelty to maintain claims of state legitimacy and control. Brundage argues that discursive marginalization of torture is as much an ‘American tradition’ as the act itself. For the image of a truly democratic and enlightened American society to be projected at home and abroad, torture has needed to be imagined as an act committed outside the borders and influence of the United States – which, as Brundage highlights, has been far from the historical reality.

In sobering prose, *Civilizing Torture* documents incidents of extreme cruelty, enacted and defended by the U.S. government, from the streets of Chicago to Abu Ghraib. Brundage consults a wide range of historical sources for this study, drawing on military and civilian criminal court records, Senate hearings and reports and newspapers. In Chapters 1, 2, and 3, Brundage details atrocities and acts of torture perpetrated in early America and the antebellum period against Native Americans, prisoners, and slaves. In Chapter 4, Brundage focuses on the Civil War era, specifically the treatment of Union and Confederate prisoners of war in military internment camps. Chapter 5 examines the use of torture against guerrilla forces and Filipino civilians during the U.S. occupation of the Philippines. Chapter 6 examines torture in the U.S. in the early twentieth century, focusing on both lynch mobs and the use of the ‘third degree’ by police officers. While Brundage demonstrates how African Americans and other minority groups have experienced police violence and torture disproportionately throughout U.S. history, this chapter also highlights the ethnic diversity of police torture victims from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century and the proliferation of the ‘third degree’ throughout the country. Chapter 7 details the role of the CIA and the U.S. military during the Cold War, examining the use of torture against Viet Cong suspects and Vietnamese civilians, as well as the cruelty enacted in scientific research on non-voluntary subjects within the U.S. In his final chapter, Brundage places the acts of torture committed by the U.S. military and the CIA during the War on Terror within a broader historical context, highlighting the continuous discrepancy between U.S. rhetorical commitments to human rights with the proliferation of torture in U.S. policy.

Brundage documents the long life of particular torture techniques through American history. The ‘water cure,’ for example, was used in U.S. prisons in the 1850s before being transported to the Philippines at the turn of the twentieth century. It was then renamed ‘water boarding’ and used against suspects in the War on Terror. While Brundage offers important details on these modes of torture, he refrains from merely detailing a graphic list of abuses.

Brundage analyzes public debates surrounding torture and details the efforts of Americans who worked to oppose and publicize acts of torture. This book is as much about language and power, as it is about specific act of torture. The adoption of euphemistic terms in the media and within American society (such as the ‘third degree’ or ‘enhanced interrogation’) for what are essentially forms of torture is a particularly salient reminder of the power of language to both condone and marginalize suffering.

Taking inspiration from Hannah Arendt, Brundage concludes his study by locating responsibility for the ‘American tradition’ of torture not with individual citizens or particular administrations, but as being dispersed throughout the bureaucratic structure of American government and society.¹ It is this unique power structure which has allowed for acts of torture to occur at a significant remove from the public eye and imagination. Such a conclusion is profound, provocative and timely; linking colonial violence with foreign military interventions, lynching, police violence, and mass incarceration.

This study’s relevance lies not only in the important links that it draws between different forms of violence but also that it has arrived in a period of American history when, at least rhetorically, torture is experiencing a resurgent visibility. Gina Haspel, who was responsible for overseeing a CIA black site in Thailand where torture and interrogation of terror suspects occurred, was nominated and confirmed as CIA Director in May 2018. Similarly, in the 2016 campaign, then Republican nominee Donald Trump encouraged violence against protesters at his campaign rallies, defended police brutality, and supported the return of water boarding. It would be a mistake, however, to consider torture a partisan issue. As Brundage highlights, torture has been endemic to American history – taking responsibility, therefore, involves focusing not on one party platform but on American society and identity, past and present.

Given its relevancy, further scholarship on this topic is simply a necessity. Brundage opens several avenues for future analysis, notably the role of class in police torture and the use of torture by non-state actors within the U.S. *Civilizing Torture* represents an important scholarly reckoning with the truth that torture and acts of extreme violence have been a significant part of American life since European settlement. Brundage challenges the reader to consider that such acts are driven by the rhetorical dehumanization of supposed enemies, and that this rhetoric is key to justifying torture before, during and after the event. Given the current state of U.S. political discourse, this fact should serve as a clear indication that any complacency towards the subject of torture is extremely unfounded and unwise.

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¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951).