

By Roy Eidelson

From [OpEdNews](#) | Original Article

The [controversy](#) continues regarding retired military psychologist Larry James, who is seeking an executive director position in the College of Education at the University of Missouri. As one of two finalists for the position, last week James participated in a public forum at the university. Many of the questions following his formal presentation were about his work a decade ago at the Guantanamo Bay Detention Center in Cuba, where hundreds of men and boys from Afghanistan and elsewhere were imprisoned and interrogated as part of the U.S. "war on terror."

James avoided answering several of these probing questions posed to him at the event. For example, he didn't address concerns about the sexist and homophobic descriptions in his book *Fixing Hell*, and he chose not to clarify whether he knew that he was violating international conventions against torture when he participated in the "disappearing" of three Afghan juveniles. But in responding more fully to other questions, James did make claims that merit much closer examination.

First, consider James' account of the [ethics complaints](#) filed against him. At last week's forum he claimed that he was fully exonerated by the state boards of Louisiana and Ohio. James told the audience that the Louisiana board "investigated these allegations thoroughly and dismissed them." And describing the Ohio complaint, he said that it was "reviewed, investigated, thrown out." But these are at best highly idiosyncratic and biased interpretations of the actual events. In Louisiana, the state board simply [refused](#) to conduct an investigation. And in Ohio, the board offered [no explanation](#) in deciding that it was "unable to proceed to formal action."

These rulings are far from compelling evidence of innocence. James is undoubtedly familiar with the [ethics complaint](#) filed in Texas in 2010 against the CIA contract psychologist who designed and implemented the Bush Administration's post-9/11 torturous "enhanced

interrogation techniques," including waterboarding. Despite thousands of pages of documentation and sworn testimony, the Texas board nevertheless

[dismissed this case](#)

, asserting that the evidence was insufficient to prove that any violation had occurred. Last week James noted that CIA contract psychologists had preceded him at Guantanamo and "did some diabolical things" while there, and in his book he explains that their abusive tactics were exactly what needed "fixing." So although he doesn't acknowledge it, James very well knows -- as we all should know -- that when it comes to "war on terror" psychologists, serious wrongdoing does not necessarily lead to censure by state licensing boards.

Second, several of James' responses to questions about his actions and his responsibilities were seemingly inconsistent -- both with each other and with what he's written in *Fixing Hell*. For instance, in his book James describes how, when he first saw the photos from Abu Ghraib -- of naked inmates piled on top of each other and other disturbing images -- he thought, "What dumbass psychologist at the prison let this happen? Didn't he read the standard operating procedure I wrote at Gitmo?" Guantanamo's 2003 Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) did not authorize abuses as horrific as some of those uncovered at Abu Ghraib. But the manual did mandate an initial four weeks of extended isolation -- known to cause severe mental pain and suffering -- in order to "enhance and exploit the disorientation and disorganization felt by a newly arrived detainee." When an audience member at last week's forum asked James if he had been involved in the drafting of these SOPs, James said, "I had nothing to do with those." He went on to explain that the SOPs

he wrote dealt only with "mundane day-to-day issues" like "what uniforms we wear." If these minor matters were indeed the basis of the regulations that James drafted while the Chief Psychologist of the Joint Intelligence Group at Guantanamo, how could he imagine that they would have prevented the Abu Ghraib atrocities?

Third, and most disturbingly for human rights advocates and those concerned about psychological ethics, consider this self-congratulatory statement from James at the forum: "The work that I did literally changed and outlawed all of these abusive interrogation tactics. So had I not gone to Guantanamo, I often wonder what would have happened." This statement is very similar to the claim he makes in his book: "There also have been no incidents of abuse at Guantanamo Bay by either an interrogator or psychologist reported since my arrival in Cuba in January 2003." Yet again, the evidence offers little support for James' misleading recordkeeping, unless he's interpreting abuse in a way that drains it of all meaning. For instance, in *Fixing Hell* James recounts pouring himself a cup of coffee and watching an interrogation session in which four men had wrestled a naked detainee to the floor, had already put pink panties, lipstick, and a wig on the detainee, and were now trying to force him into a matching pink nightgown. Obviously this occurred while James was at Guantanamo -- he watched it happen. Does it fall short of his threshold for what constitutes abuse? Or does it not count as abuse simply because he did not report it?

But we need not rely solely on James' own account for evidence contradicting his boastful claims about an abuse-free Guantanamo. Just a few months after James departed, in an October 2003 memorandum the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) raised serious concerns about detainee isolation and caged cells. Even more telling, after a June 2004 inspection, the ICRC described a system ["tantamount to torture"](#) with detainees subjected to solitary confinement, humiliating acts, prolonged exposure to extreme temperatures, forced stress positions, exposure to loud and persistent noise, and some beatings. Indeed the ICRC inspectors reached this overall conclusion: "The construction of such a system, whose stated purpose is the production of intelligence, cannot be considered other than an intentional system of cruel, unusual and degrading treatment and a form of torture." That assessment was made just a year after James had completed his supposedly transformative stint at Guantanamo. Of course, in his book James dismisses representatives of the ICRC as "a bunch of radical left do-gooders" who were as interested in giving America a black eye as they were in truly helping the innocent."

Matters are illuminated even further by comparing the Army's official [2003](#) and [2004](#) SOP manuals for the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo. Bear in mind that throughout this period (and thereafter) Behavioral Science Consultation Team psychologists like James held key consultative roles in regard to both the detention conditions and interrogation procedures at Guantanamo. Despite the non-specific improvements for which James gives himself credit, the comparison of SOPs during and after his Guantanamo deployment offers little to cheer about. For example, both SOPs referenced the routine use of extended isolation, including for four weeks after a new detainee's arrival. Both SOPs employed military working dogs for "psychological deterrence." In both SOPs toilet paper was listed as a "privilege," with a full roll described as a "special reward." And both SOPs barred the Red Cross from access to some detainees.

Finally, the Senate Armed Services Committee's redacted [2008 report](#) on the treatment of detainees in U.S. custody includes well over 100 pages focused specifically on Guantanamo, and several pages describe events that reportedly occurred during James' deployment there in the first half of 2003. Allegations of abuse included interrogation personnel and military police subjecting detainees to "forced physical training;" a female interrogator sitting on a detainee's lap "making sexual affiliated movements with her chest and pelvis while again speaking sexually oriented sentences;" and a female interrogator wiping "what she told the detainee was menstrual blood on a detainee's face and forehead." Another memo concluded that "the incidents occurring during the Spring of 2003 signif[ied] a consistent problem at GTMO." And other documents at that time indicate that "in addition to the use of strobe lights and loud music, techniques such as forced shaving, sensory deprivation and even implied threats of death were either used or planned for use." In sum, evidence contradicting James' assurance that there were "no incidents of abuse" is overwhelming.

Moving forward, one hopes that all stakeholders will carefully review the claims that Larry James has made, including those described here. It has long been said that everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts. Certainly this applies to the consequential decision facing the search committee at the University of Missouri in the weeks immediately ahead. It's to be expected that job applicants will present their experiences and credentials in the most positive light they can. But sometimes the darkness seems inescapable.

*Roy Eidelson is a psychologist who studies, writes about, and consults on the role of psychological issues in political, organizational, and group conflict settings. He is president of [Eidelson Consulting](#), a past president of Psychologists for Social Responsibility, and a member of the Coalition for an Ethical Psychology.*