

By Jeffrey Kaye

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The Obama administration has replaced the use of brutal torture techniques with those that emphasize psychological torture



Anti-torture activists, wearing Guantànamo-style orange jumpsuits, demonstrate outside the White House in June 2011. Photograph: Karen Bleier/AFP/Getty Images

The [United States Army Field Manual \(AFM\) on interrogation](#) (pdf) has been sold to the American public and the world as a replacement for the brutal [torture](#) tactics used by the CIA and the Department of Defense during the Bush/Cheney administration.

On 22 January 2009, President Obama [released an executive order](#) stating that any individual

held by any US government agency "shall not be subjected to any interrogation technique or approach, or any treatment related to interrogation, that is not authorized by and listed in Army Field Manual 22-3."

But a close reading of Department of Defense documents and investigations by numerous human rights agencies have shown that the current Army Field Manual itself uses techniques that are abusive and can even amount to torture.

Disturbingly, the latest version of the AFM mimicked the Bush administration in separating out "war on terror" prisoners as not subject to the same protections and rights as regular prisoners of war. Military authorities then added an appendix to the AFM that included techniques that could only be used on such "detainees", ie, prisoners without POW status.

Labeled Appendix M, and propounding an additional, special "technique" called "Separation", [human rights and legal group](#) have recognized that Appendix M includes numerous abusive techniques, including use of solitary confinement, sleep deprivation and sensory deprivation.

According to Appendix M, sleep can be limited to four hours per day for up to 30 days, and even more with approval. The same is true for use of isolation. Theoretically, sleep deprivation and solitary confinement could be extended indefinitely.

According to a 2003 [US Southern Command instruction](#) (pdf) to then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, sleep deprivation was defined "as keeping a detainee awake for more than 16 hours". Only three years later, when a new version of the AFM was introduced, detainees were expected to stay awake for 20 hours. Meanwhile, language in the previous AFM forbidding both sleep deprivation and use of stress positions was quietly removed from the current manual.

The use of isolation as a torture technique has a long history. According to a [classic psychiatric paper](#) (pdf) on the psychological effects of isolation (aka solitary confinement), such treatment on prisoners can "cause severe psychiatric harm", producing "an agitated confusional state which, in more severe cases, had the characteristics of a florid delirium, characterized by severe confusional,

paranoid, and hallucinatory features, and also by intense agitation and random, impulsive, often self-directed violence."

The application of the Appendix M techniques – which are considered risky enough to require the presence of a physician – are supposed to be combined with other "approaches" culled from the main text of the field manual, including techniques such as "Fear Up" and "Emotional Ego Down". In fact, at the end of Appendix M, a combined use of its techniques with other approaches, specifically "Futility", "Incentive", and "Fear Up", is suggested.

While "Fear Up" and "Incentive" approaches act somewhat like what they sound – using fear and promises to gain the "cooperation" of a prisoner under interrogation – "Futility" has a vague goal of imparting to a prisoner, according to the AFM, the notion that "resistance to questioning is futile".

According to the manual:

This engenders a feeling of hopelessness and helplessness on the part of the source.

A review of documents released under FOIA (the Freedom of Information Act) shows that use of the "Futility" approach in the AFM was the rationale behind the use of loud music, strobe lights, and sexualized assaults and embarrassment on prisoners. The "Futility" technique pre-dates the introduction of the current Army Field Manual, which is numbered 2-22.3 and introduced in September 2006. In fact, the earlier AFM, [labeled 35-52](#) (pdf), was the basis of numerous accusations of documented abuse.

In the [executive summary](#) of the 2005 Department of Defense's Schimdt-Furlow investigation into alleged abuse of Guantanamo prisoners, the use of loud music and strobe lights on prisoners was labeled "music futility", and considered an "allowed technique". Defense Department investigators looked at accusation of misuse of such techniques, but never banned them.

Military investigators wrote,

Placement of a detainee in the interrogation booth and subjecting him to loud music and strobe lights should be limited and conducted within clearly prescribed limits.

Those limits were not specified.

Additionally, the Schmidt-Furlow investigators looked at instances where female interrogators had fondled prisoners, or pretended to splash menstrual blood upon them. According to military authorities, these were a form of "gender coercion", and identified as a "futility technique".

President Obama's January 2009 executive order would seem to have halted the use of what the Defense Department called "gender coercion", but not "music futility". But we don't know because of pervasive secrecy exactly what military or other interrogators do or don't do when they employ the "Futility" technique.

Numerous human rights groups, including [Amnesty International](#), [Physicians for Human Rights](#), and the Institute on Medicine as a [Profession and Open Society Foundations](#) have called for the elimination of Appendix M and/or the rewriting of the entire Army Field Manual itself.

What has been lacking is a widespread public discourse that recognizes that swapping waterboarding and the CIA's "enhanced interrogation" torture with the Army Field Manual as an instrument of humane interrogation only replaced the use of brutal torture techniques with those that emphasize psychological torture.