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Deception and self-interest are again undermining efforts toward APA reform.

"To be in an eight-by-eight cell in beautiful, sunny Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, is not ...inhumane treatment." – former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld

Following a seven-month investigation, in July the [Hoffman Report](#) [\(link is external\)](#) presented extensive evidence of collusion between leaders of the American Psychological Association (APA) and Department of Defense (DoD) officials. This secret

[collaboration](#)

– conducted over a period of years – was aimed at ensuring that APA

[ethics](#)

policies would not constrain DoD interrogation-related activities, and that psychologists would remain in operational roles at Guantanamo Bay and other U.S. overseas detention centers.

The report includes a detailed examination of the APA's controversial 2005 Presidential Task Force on Psychological Ethics and National Security ([PENS](#) [\(link is external\)](#)). The PENS task force, stacked with military

[intelligence](#)

representatives, asserted that Behavioral Science Consultation Team (BSCT) psychologists helped to keep detention and interrogation operations

["safe, legal, ethical, and effective"](#)

[\(link is external\)](#)

– despite multiple

[reports](#)

[\(link is external\)](#)

that

[health](#)

professionals were among the perpetrators of detainee torture and abuse.

Ideally, the Hoffman Report's revelations will serve as a [springboard](#) for long overdue soul-searching, accountability, and reform within the APA and the psychology profession. But disgruntled factions, including individuals identified in the report, are pursuing a deceptive and self-protective [campaign](#) designed to discredit the Hoffman Report, restore their reputations, and preserve business as usual at the APA.

The latest entry comes from an unsurprising source: the [leadership](#) of the APA's Division 19, the Society for Military Psychology. In November, a Division 19 task force (TF19) issued its [critique](#) [\(link is external\)](#) of the Hoffman Report. Of particular note, the critique neither seriously addresses nor refutes the core elements of the APA-DoD collusion: namely, the covert agenda and secret correspondence, the manipulation and cover-up, and the strategic [deception](#) directed toward APA members and the general public.

Instead, the TF19 members seek to dismiss the Hoffman Report's findings by arguing that abuse at Guantanamo was already eliminated prior to the APA's PENS Report, and that BSCT psychologists effectively served to prevent abuse thereafter. For example, they assert:

The [Hoffman] report, with a decade of data to draw upon, provides no evidence that following the PENS Report, any abuses occurred within the context of military interrogations where a BSCT psychologist was involved – because there is no such evidence. There have been thousands of hours of interrogation support and observation provided by military psychologists conducted without incident.

But for at least three reasons, this peculiar tack by TF19 is either disingenuous or misinformed.

Psychological Abuse and the Army Field Manual

First, what matters most is whether, after the PENS Report, Guantanamo detainees have been subjected to psychological and physical abuse – not whether DoD protocols were followed properly. The [government](#) cannot simply wave a magic wand and transform an abusive interrogation technique into one that's suddenly no longer abusive. When the Bush administration approved the use of waterboarding, for example, that didn't suddenly make it any less torturous. And when the Pentagon investigates allegations of detainee abuse, determining whether or not particular techniques were officially authorized doesn't provide a meaningful answer to the question of whether abuse actually occurred.

For this reason, TF19's uncritical endorsement of the revised 2006 [Army Field Manual](#) [\(link is external\)](#) (AFM) as the foundation for humane detention and interrogation operations is unwarranted. The AFM – and particularly its controversial Appendix M – [continues](#) [\(link is external\)](#) to allow the use of techniques that, according to a 2013 [report](#) [\(link is external\)](#) from the Institute of Medicine as a Profession, are “recognized under international law as forms of torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.” Former government interrogators [agree](#) [\(link is external\)](#) with that assessment. These techniques include [sleep](#) deprivation, extended solitary confinement, sensory deprivation, and the exploitation of [fear](#) and hopelessness. All are psychologically abusive.

Abusive Conditions of Confinement

Second, the TF19 critique deceptively focuses on formal interrogations, discounting the accompanying abusive conditions of confinement that have characterized the daily lives of many detainees at Guantanamo. These two components are inherently inseparable. Indeed multiple versions of the [guidelines](#) [\(link is external\)](#) for psychologist-led Behavioral Science Consultation Teams have specified that BSCT responsibilities include serving as command consultants for *both* detention and interrogation operations (and they are explicitly not responsible for the provision of clinical support to the detainees themselves).

This dual involvement for psychologists goes all the way back to Guantanamo's first year as a detention facility. In 2002, APA member [John Leso](#) [\(link is external\)](#) co-authored a key Guantanamo “counter-resistance” memo. In addition to outlining three categories of increasingly harsh interrogation techniques, the memo recommended that “all aspects of the [detention] [environment](#) should enhance capture shock, dislocate expectations, foster dependence, and support exploitation to the fullest extent possible,” including sleep deprivation and removal of comfort items.

Even though TF19 argues that abuse was eliminated post-PENS, almost four years later in February 2009, one month into President Obama's first term, the Center for Constitutional Rights released a [report \(link is external\)](#) that documented ongoing psychological abuse at Guantanamo. For example:

Confined to small steel and concrete cells for at least 20 hours a day, the prisoners in Camps 5, 6 and Echo have virtually no human contact or mental stimulation. Food is delivered through a metal slot in the door and the men eat all their meals alone. The men can try to shout to one another through the slot with great difficulty, and at risk of disciplinary sanction that can result in the loss of "privileges" and imposition of 24-hour lock down in their cell or aggressive attacks by IRF [Immediate Reaction Force] teams. Items such as toothpaste, a toothbrush, deodorant, soap, and blankets are classified as "privileges" and can be taken away at will. Camp 6 has no windows that face the outside, and Camp 5 has only a thin opaque window slit in each cell. ...Lights are kept on 24 hours a day in Camp 5.

Indefinite Detention Is Abusive

Third, the TF19 critique ignores the psychologically devastating effects of indefinite detention, a continuing reality for Guantanamo detainees – again long after the collusive PENS Report was adopted by the APA. Although task force members may believe that this falls short of psychological abuse, experts disagree with them. For example, in Senate [testimony \(link is external\)](#) in July 2013, the executive director of the Center for Victims of Torture stated:

The very indeterminacy of indefinite detention, without charge or process for review and eventual determinate sentence or release, creates a degree of uncertainty, unpredictability and loss of control over the elemental aspects of one's life, causing severe harm in healthy individuals, independent of other aspects or conditions of detention. For these reasons, the physical and psychological ramifications of indefinite detention rise to the level of cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment (CID), a violation of U.S. treaty obligations under the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or [Punishment \(CAT\)](#) and in contravention of U.S. constitutional law.

And as a reminder, at its meeting last year in Geneva, the UN Committee Against Torture also [emphasized](#) [\(link is external\)](#) that indefinite detention is a clear violation of international law:

The Committee expresses its deep concern about the fact that the State party continues to hold a number of individuals without charge at Guantanamo Bay detention facilities. Notwithstanding the State party's position that these individuals have been captured and detained as 'enemy belligerents' and that under the law of war is permitted 'to hold them until the end of the hostilities', the Committee reiterates that indefinite detention constitutes per se a violation of the Convention.

No More Deception

By choosing to disregard these three distressing realities, TF19 and the leaders of APA's military psychology division have offered a very dark vision for the profession of psychology – a vision that we must reject, both individually and institutionally. It should be apparent that, by any reasonable accounting, humane treatment has *not* ruled the day at Guantanamo post-PENS. To claim otherwise is an affront to the ethical practice of psychology and, even more so, to hundreds of war-on-terror detainees who have been the direct victims of abuse.

The Hoffman Report convincingly demonstrates that collusion between the APA and DoD served to preserve and [protect](#) [\(link is external\)](#) BSCT psychologists working at Guantanamo. It's now time to discard the carefully crafted fiction that these psychologists have a legitimate, ethical role to play in supporting the interrogation and detention operations there. Until they are [removed](#) [\(link is external\)](#), psychologists remain key actors in an environment that was aptly called ["the gulag of our time"](#) [\(link is external\)](#) a decade ago, and where abuses still persist today.