

By Roy Eidelson Ph.D.

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A psychologist tries to defend the indefensible, and fails.

Just in time for the Trump Administration's official embrace of brutality, we have another book defending torture: *Enhanced Interrogation* by psychologist James Mitchell. For those unfamiliar with the author, he's a central figure in the Senate

[Intelligence](#)

Committee's scathing 2014

[report](#)

summary on CIA abuse. And he's a co-defendant — for having “designed, implemented, and personally administered an experimental torture program” — in the ACLU's

[lawsuit](#)

on behalf of three war-on-terror detainees (Suleiman Abdullah Salim, Mohamed Ahmed Ben Soud, and the estate of the deceased Gul Rahman).

Although subtitled “Inside the Minds and Motives of the Islamic Terrorists Trying to Destroy America,” Mitchell's implausible and self-serving account actually reveals much more about him than it does about the men he helped torture. Here are several reasons why.

Mitchell's dubious claims about the CIA's abusive and torturous “enhanced interrogation techniques” (EITs) are reason enough to doubt his credibility. Consider this preposterous defense of the EITs: “Although they were unpleasant, their use protected detainees from being subjected to unproven and perhaps harsher techniques made up on the fly.” Apparently being locked in a coffin-like box for hours, or deprived of [sleep](#) for days, or repeatedly slammed into a wall is merely “unpleasant,” somewhat akin to getting caught in the rain without an umbrella. Indeed, perhaps the victims should have offered thanks for not having had their fingers crushed or their fingernails pulled out. Mitchell's suggestion that his EITs were somehow “proven” — in contrast to other techniques — is equally absurd. Proven not to be harmful?

[Not true](#)

. Proven to “work”? Also

[false](#)

Consider as well Mitchell's deceptive description of waterboarding, the king of the hill when it comes to EITs: “The waterboard induces [fear](#) and [panic](#). It is scary and uncomfortable but

not painful.” There’s really no need to puzzle over how the experience of controlled drowning and near suffocation could possibly be pain-free. It’s certainly not, except perhaps for the person who’s pouring the water. The Senate report on CIA torture provides this account of Mitchell’s first waterboarding session: “Over a two-and-a-half-hour period, Abu Zubaydah coughed, vomited, and had ‘involuntary spasms of the torso and extremities.’” Not painful?

Just as disturbing are Mitchell’s self-protective efforts to humanize the proponents and practitioners of torture. As one example, he describes a scene in which he and fellow contract psychologist Bruce Jessen waterboard Abu Zubaydah as a demonstration for a group of higher-ups from the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center. Here’s Mitchell’s description of what happened when that interrogation session came to an end: “[We] told him we never wanted to do that again. He cried and promised to work for the CIA. Everyone, even those observing, was tearful.” Perhaps they then passed around a box of tissue, followed by a round of hugs?

There’s also a rather inconvenient truth that makes Mitchell’s posturing as a self-sacrificing patriot unconvincing: he took home a small fortune from his years of involvement with CIA torture and abuse. In his book, Mitchell makes no mention of the reported \$1,800-a-day consulting fees (tax-free) he initially received for his work. He also downplays his own haul from the \$81 million CIA contract his firm Mitchell Jessen & Associates later received, writing: “The percentage of profit I earned from the contract was in the small single digits.” Well, let’s use “3” as a representative “small single digit.” That works out to about \$2.5 million for Mitchell alone. Not bad for such selflessness.

Elsewhere in *Enhanced Interrogation*, Mitchell makes it clear that he cast aside professional psychology’s do-no-harm [ethics](#) in developing his gloves-off EITs. Obviously. By his reckoning, torturous techniques were “justified as long as those methods were lawful, authorized, and carefully monitored.” Mitchell’s personal calculus as a psychologist wasn’t unique: similar thinking apparently prompted leaders of the American Psychological Association (APA) to [collude](#) with the Bush Administration, thereby enabling psychologists to play key roles in abusive U.S. detention and interrogation operations. APA’s tragic choices, made over the course of a decade, caused grievous harm. The verdict is still out on the organization’s current efforts aimed at institutional [reform](#).

When describing his decision to opt for the dark side, Mitchell offers this cryptic observation: “I

would never again be able to work as a psychologist.” That sounds like good news, but what exactly does he mean? After all, Mitchell continued working “as a psychologist” for the CIA thereafter, and it was only years later that his [identity](#) and his actions became publicly known. Meanwhile, most other psychologists involved in abusive interrogations — either at various black sites or at military detention facilities like Guantanamo Bay — remain unidentified even now. But if Mitchell’s “never again” comment means he thinks that all psychologists who’ve engaged in these activities should never be allowed to practice in the light of day, it’s difficult to disagree with him.

Finally, it’s hard not to be skeptical about the numerous lengthy conversations that are miraculously presented word-for-word in *Enhanced Interrogation*, so many years after they transpired. However, there’s one instance where Mitchell quotes himself that’s worth highlighting here. He describes trying to

[persuade](#)

Abu Zubaydah to answer his questions — just before turning to the waterboard instead — this way: “In every man’s life there are moments of opportunity that open and close. Moments of choice when the decision you make forever changes what happens to you. This is one of those moments.” Of course Mitchell was facing exactly the same kind of moment himself. The choice he made had calamitous effects that still persist today — not only for the detainees who were tortured, but for the profession and the country as well.