Peter Molin’s “Strike Through the Mask!”: Interment at Arlington

The vet read that the hero’s burial ceremony in Arlington Cemetery was taking place the following Tuesday. As it happened, the vet was going to be in Arlington, the county in Virginia, that day and he had known the hero. They had taught together at West Point, and thought the vet was senior to the hero and they didn’t socialize outside of department functions, a couple of episodes had offered closer looks at him. Among other things, the hero was on the softball team coached by the vet in their last summer together.

The hero played left field, an important position in softball. The leftfielder has to catch the long drives hit by the

opposing team’s best right-handed hitters. That summer, the hero chased down those towering shots, or circled under them, until he reared them in. It never seemed like a sure thing, honestly, but the hero almost always got them. The hero was fast, too, so he batted lead-off or second in the line-up. He was not a home-run hitter, but could easily turn a single into a double if the opposing team did not field the ball cleanly or hesitated for a moment.

But the hero was not a hero for his softball ability. Early in the post-9/11 wars he had protested the interrogation tactics used by members of his platoon when they questioned detainees in Afghanistan. Brutality, let’s just say torture, was forbidden by policy and regulation, but now appeared to be a tolerated standard practice. The hero sought clarification first from his chain-of-command and then from the highest governmental levels in Washington. He then took his concerns to a human-rights watchdog group in New York. The hero had been celebrated for doing so by many and was even been named a “Man of the Year” by Time magazine. Others, however, considered him a troublemaker. Couldn’t he have addressed the problem other than by writing politicians and advocacy groups? The vet wondered how he might have handled the same situation.

At West Point, the vet had seen the hero lead a philosophy workshop. He was laser focused, deeply logical, and profoundly aware of competing factors and viewpoints, which he would unpack in detail in front of the workshop attendees. As he spoke, he paced back and forth like a caged tiger. The furious physical expenditure of mental energy was endearing. The vet had read comments by the hero’s former students and it was clear the hero’s students had been in awe of him. In the workshop, watching him give birth to the intricacies of an argument, it was easy to see why. The vet also understood why a woman, a colleague, loved the hero and eventually married him.

At the end of his tour at West Point, the hero left the Army

after 15 years on active duty. He said he had enough of the military and now wanted to study philosophy as a civilian.

But the years after the Army did not go well. First gradually, then quickly, the hero's life disintegrated. In the beginning, he excelled in graduate school, but then his work grew erratic and unsubtle. He picked fights with other scholars and his marriage fell apart. Eventually the hero lost his apartment and was several times detained by the police for public outbursts of craziness. He was hospitalized more than once, but because he had left the Army before retiring, and it was not clear that his present maladies were service-related, the VA was slow to assume care for him. Subject to the vagrancies of state-provided mental care, he was in-and-out of institutions.

Friends from the military tried to help. So did childhood friends and distinguished professors who had been impressed by the hero's early work and potential. The decline continued, however, and as so often happens, the hero resisted efforts by others to help him. Toward the end, his grip on what Poe once called "the precincts of reality" was tenuous. In 2021, he was found dead in his room at a mental hospital. The exact cause of his death remains unclear. Was it too much or the wrong kind of medication? Was it suicide? Did his mind and body just give out?

Now the vet sat in his car alongside other cars lined up outside the burial office at Arlington Cemetery. He knew how these interments happened, because the previous summer he had been in attendance for the interment of a childhood friend's mother alongside her husband, a Korean War-era vet, who had died years earlier. The vet had known his friend's father well and knew how much his Army service meant to him, along with the prospect of burial at Arlington. He also knew the interment process to be an orderly and dignified one that respected the deceased and his or her family members. Still, that interment had been a markedly casual event, with little

ceremony or eulogizing of the departed. The vet had enjoyed the company of his friend and his two children, who were now adults and whom he had not seen in decades. The cemetery official was a retired Army paratrooper, and the vet, who had also been a paratrooper, bandied with the official about their airborne days. Only when the cemetery official opened the columbarium "niche," as the square burial vaults are called, where the ashes of his friend's father lay waiting for his wife to join him, did the vet feel the momentousness of the event.

On cue, the procession of cars began to snake through the cemetery to the burial location. The hero was also to be interred in a columbarium niche, but there would be a service before the interment. A tent was set up among the gravestones to provide shade for the hero's immediate family, along with chairs for them to sit in. Others in attendance, about fifty, stood in the sun, though for a summer day in Virginia it was neither hot nor humid. Off in the distance, the vet could see the Pentagon, which seemed ironically appropriate. An Army chaplain, a woman, stood waiting, along with a small detail of uniformed soldiers poised to fold the flag covering the hero's burial urn. About 100 yards away stood a platoon-sized honor guard and a military band. Also present was a firing squad and bugler. The vet recognized a couple of teachers from West Point with whom he and the hero had taught, but not anyone else he knew. The attendees seemed composed equally of family and friends who looked like they might have either served with the hero or been his students. Only a couple of attendees were in uniform—none especially high-ranking.

The chaplain called the service to order. She said kind words about the hero without shying away from the controversies that marked his service and his sad final days. She read from Romans 8:28: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" When she finished, the detail folded the flag and presented it to the hero's father. The bugler played Taps and the firing squad

fired a three-round salute. Then the chaplain asked for a volunteer to carry the urn containing hero's ashes to the columbarium. At first no one volunteered, and the vet wondered if it was appropriate if he stepped forward. Then the hero's father said that he would carry his son's remains.

The vet had read that the hero's father was a former Marine Corps machine-gunner and a Vietnam veteran. He had also read that the father hated the military and had been a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. He was the only male at the ceremony not formally dressed or in military attire. Confined to a wheelchair, wearing a plaid lumberjack shirt, the hero's father exuded determination that his son's life was worthy of military honor.

As the procession walked to the columbarium, the band played a song that sounded like the Elvis Presley classic "Love Me Tender." It's a sweet song, but the vet wondered at the selection. Only later did he learn that the melody belonged first to a song called "Army Blue" that predated "Love Me Tender" and was long associated with West Point.

The columbarium at Arlington Cemetery has its own kind of dignity, but it's narrow for the purposes of a ceremonial gathering. The previous summer, at the vet's friend's mother's interment, there was only the cemetery official, the friend, and the friend's son and daughter. Now the attendees squeezed into the row between the walls of burial niches or looked on from the ends of the rows. More words were said, but from the vet's position it was hard to hear them. After final remarks were completed, attendees filed past the niche and paid their last respects.

The vet had so far viewed the day's events abstractly, almost without emotion or consolidated articulation of his thoughts about the hero. But when his turn came to stand before the urn in its dark square final resting place, tears welled up and the vet suddenly found himself both short of breath and short

of words. Conscious that others were waiting in line behind him, he stammered under his breath, “Good job man, good job” and moved on.

Following the ceremony, the vet spoke with his friends from West Point and a couple of others present. Someone pointed out former students of the hero’s. Another pointed out the childhood friend who had gone to the most length to organize help for the hero in his troubled final days. No ready opportunity to speak with the hero’s family presented itself, and the vet was hesitant to force the issue. A reception was announced, but the vet didn’t get the location and had already decided he would not attend.

An official announced it was time to for the procession to depart and the attendees in their cars drove slowly toward the cemetery gates.

On the way out of the cemetery, the vet saw signs directing traffic to the Marine Corps War Memorial. It had been a long time since he had visited the memorial, so he followed the signs to the parking lot. He walked around the grounds, read the signage, and contemplated the magnificent statue of the six soldiers raising the flag on Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima. The crowd was sparse: a few casually-attired tourists and some vet old-timers wearing ball-caps adorned with patches and pins representing military units. Unexpectedly, a wedding party, dressed in their finest, strolled by from a site farther off from the statue where they had gathered for pictures.

After taking it all in for a while, the vet walked back to his car.

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Biographical details about the life of Ian Fishback not recounted from memory were obtained from C.J. Chivers, “Ian Fishback’s American Nightmare.” *New York Times*, February 21, 2023.

https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/21/magazine/ian-fishback.html

Yes, We Tortured Some Folks

By now everyone in the world has heard about the recently released U.S. Senate Torture Report, which details the shocking and mind-numbing inhumanity of the torture program sanctioned by the Bush administration and operated by the C.I.A. after 9/11. With the appearance of this new report, there has been an enormous amount of press coverage and commentary in America and around the world, which must be considered a victory for freedom of speech, press, and information. One representative example of good reporting on this case is this recent New York Times article. The more we

understand and discuss this issue, the better we can avoid ever repeating the same crimes* (I use this word rather than the more euphemistic “mistakes”, as in the common *newspeak* example “mistakes were made”, as can be seen in the C.I.A. director’s unrepentent rebuttal to the report).

The issue of torture is one that has troubled me for some time. At a press conference last year, American President Barack Obama uttered the phrase “We tortured some folks.” While this acknowledgement was a small step in the right direction in admitting the possible existence of responsibility and guilt in the highest levels of government, it is troubling in its own ways. First of all, the phrasing itself is incongruous, with the transitive verb “torture” being followed by the unlikely direct object phrase “some folks”. Obama has most likely been advised by his speaking coaches to use more down-to-earth vocabulary like “some folks” in order to seem less “professorial” and more simple “middle American” (in America, there is a prevalent view that the best way to win votes is to appear as normal and mediocre as possible). Anyway, “some folks” is not a phrase that should follow “tortured”. I have enough trouble imagining people being tortured who may be actual terrorists without also having to imagine the torture of average innocent “folks”.

The second problem with Obama is that he apparently tried to stop, delay, or water-down the Senate Torture Report for reasons slightly mystifying. Obama famously cancelled his predecessor’s torture program in his first week in office and has often said how he disagrees with what was done (notice the use of the passive voice). The only reason he would stand in the way of this report is respectful fear of the intelligence community, namely the C.I.A. And I don’t blame him—the C.I.A. scares me a lot more than any actual terrorist organization. Even as an American citizen who is ostensibly “protected” by the C.I.A. because of my natural born citizenship, I am still somewhat fearful of attempting to openly criticize this

organization by describing in greater detail its long criminal history. Its crimes are so widespread over the course of its entire seven-decade history that the only shocking thing is that more people in America do not know or care anything about what is done by such powerful and unaccountable organizations in the name of their security. In fact, in many countries in the world, where the C.I.A. has supported assassinations, regime change, torture, and state-sponsored violence, it is quite strongly believed to be an evil terrorist organization in itself, but in America people still believe the old lie that it protects Americans' safety and interests. A revealing fact is that for the first time ever the director of the C.I.A., currently John Brennan, has testified in front of a Senate hearing. In a long and sordid history, the governing body overseeing this organization has never resorted to a public investigative hearing until now. What we do know is that not only is this one of the most unsupervised and counter-productive of publicly-funded American agencies, but also one of the most flagrantly dishonest, with lies covering up deceptions covering up misinformation. No matter if it is spinning counter-intelligence abroad or testifying in front of elected lawmakers, we can be sure that the lies run deep. The proper thing to do would be to disband the C.I.A. and start over with a smaller and less problematic intelligence agency.

The details of the torture report, which is 6000 pages in length, of which 500 are declassified, are so harrowing and brutal that I do not want to mention them here. They have been widely reported and the readers are encouraged to look into it further if you have not already. Or just take my word for it that it is worse than you can imagine. There is something about torture that is more emotional and horrifying than anything else we can imagine. Thinking about humans, even ones possibly guilty of some crime or another, being tortured by other humans makes my stomach turn and makes me want to break down and cry. Thinking that it was done repeatedly to humans who sometimes committed no crime at all is too much to bear.

Accordingly, this article is being written in a haphazard way, guided by my emotions and my wandering train of thought rather than in well-ordered paragraphs. In his book *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Richard Rorty often repeats the claim of Judith Shklar that "liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do…the willful inflicting of physical pain on a weaker being in order to cause anguish and fear…or the willful infliction of a certain kind of nonphysical pain called humiliation." That quote has stuck with me, not because of its political context, but because of its ethical ramifications.

For years after 9/11, we heard about how torture was necessary if it allowed us to stop "the next attack". The word torture was never used—it was defined as "enhanced interrogation techniques" for obvious euphemistic reasons—and the media never challenged the new fear narrative that gripped the country. The use of language can be a powerful tool in the hands of media and politicians, and they knew that there would be less concern about something labelled "enhanced interrogation techniques" than there would be for the much more visual and visceral "torture". We could similarly rebrand the death penalty as "enhanced state-run life-taking procedure", or war as "enhanced state-sanctioned attack and defense system". In this kind of Orwellian *newspeak*, meaning is both hidden and meaningless at the same time. It is no coincidence that TV programs like "24" were popular in these years. I never watched it, but I am aware of its false glorification and justification of the use of torture because the soldiers around me during my deployments were often prone to become obsessed with certain TV shows and binge watch an entire series in a week. The truth, which we can see clearly now that the fear has passed and some of our rationality has slowly come creeping back, is that torture never stopped the next attack, and that there never was and never will be any legal justification for torture.

Even now, after the release of this report, the torture apologists have crawled out of their caves insisting on the same lies, as though even had all of this torture stopped a single attack, it would have been worth it. It is telling that cowardly men like former Vice President Dick Cheney (who avoided military service at all costs) refuse to acknowledge regret for the black tide of illegal war and immoral acts they duped the country into, yet men like John McCain, who was tortured as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, remain firmly against it due to hard-lived experience and certainty of its inefficacy and immorality. It is also troubling that no less than a Supreme Court justice has justified the case for torture using the ticking time bomb situation (Antonin Scalia's Case for Torture) and saying things like "I think it's facile for people to say, 'Oh, torture is terrible.'" Yes, it's facile because it is terrible, and illegal, and immoral.

The philosophy of utilitarianism derived from Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill is a useful and interesting moral calculus for certain types of situations. In certain cases, the best thing to do is the one in which the most number of people will benefit or be happy. We can stretch this even into financial considerations of how to best spend money in a way which will benefit the most number of people. This should be considered one tool among many to weigh the merits and demerits of a particular decision, but not a hard and fast ethical rule. Doing so leads us into any number of thought experiments where we are playing with human lives and trying to decide the most moral thing to do. Utilitarianism is one form of consequentialism, which basically says that the benefit of an action is decided by its consequences, and not in the action itself. Thus, with the famous trolley car thought experiment, we are asked whether we will shift a runaway train onto a track where it will kill only one man instead of five. Though some will disagree, these types of problems are a proverbial “bridge too far” in the field of

ethics. Once human life is involved, rather than mere lifestyle or economic questions, the equation changes. It becomes more emotional, more blurry, less calculable. If I was asked to kill one man to save five, or even to save 100, I am not sure that I could do it. That is exactly the situation presented in John Fowles' book, *The Magus*. The Nazis on a Greek island (it is also no coincidence that Nazis and torture are our two ubiquitous subjects for testing the extreme limits of various ethical positions) gave the character a choice of shooting three men in order to save the village, but he could not pull the trigger. When we are asked to do the dirty deed, or to unjustly take human life, something changes in the consequentialist calculus and the ends no longer justify the means.

In the system of ethics devised by Immanuel Kant, "duty" ethics, a man is called to do his duty by acting so that his action will make a universal law. This so-called categorical imperative calls for us to never treat someone as a means to an end, but rather an end in himself. There are holes in this line of thinking, especially that it is too categorical (for example, Kant would have us tell the truth even if a lie protected a loved one from harm), and that what a man wills can differ from person to person (for example, what was willed by the Nazis into being universal law is not what we want to represent our infallible sense of morality). What I take from Kant's system is his dignity for humanity and for each person existing as an end rather than a means. This is important. Paradoxically, torture cannot be justified in a Kantian system of ethics since it violates personal sovereignty and dignity, yet National Socialism could be justified if it was willed into being as the representation of universal law by a society.

Back to modern times, this brief synopsis was intended to give some philosophical perspective, but I must insist, against certain consequentialist philosophers, some film and TV

producers, and some politicians that there is no situation in which torture can be justified. Ever. A situation will not arise in which torture is necessary for any reason. There is no ticking time bomb. There are no lives to save. It is all dissimulation in order to maintain some sense of power and control by the torturer. “The torturer”, in this case, must be understood to represent not America as a whole, but a certain specific regime that controlled America for some years before losing democratic election. Since torture is not only immoral in all circumstances, but also illegal according to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and many other national and international laws, someone should rightfully be held accountable for such crimes. In comparable historical contexts, I would not hold the modern countries of Chile and Argentina accountable for the crimes and torture inflicted by the authoritarian regimes of Pinochet and Videla, to name just two examples; the responsibility is of those who held power and made decisions first and foremost. On the other hand, these countries renounced the crimes of their dictator regimes and prosecuted anyone who was involved whenever possible. This raises the question of prosecuting members of the Bush administration and the C.I.A. leadership for crimes against humanity. It is an open question in which I will leave to the legal authorities and scholars whether it is legally possible or politically wise, but I think it is safe to say that the torture report is a step in the right direction, but seeing high-ranking abusers of power on trial would be an even more powerful statement than a partially declassified report.

It is also troubling that while Obama has refused to prosecute anyone for admitted crimes, saying things like "it's important to look forward and not backwards" (do they ever say that about any other situation where someone committed a crime?), the only person who has been prosecuted in the C.I.A. torture case is the person who leaked information about it to the press. His name is John Kiriakou, and he is currently serving a 30-month prison sentence for leaking information about

illegal activity, while the illegal activity itself goes unpunished.

Lastly, I would like to briefly speculate on the principles behind the practice of torture which, in my opinion, comes from the corrupt desire to exert complete power and control over another living being. One of the best books I've read that deals with torture is the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* by Nobel laureate J.M. Coetzee. Bertrand Russell, in his 1938 book *Power: A New Social Analysis*, attempted to define a new sociology based on power being the supreme guiding principle of social science. He says, "The ultimate power of the Law is the coercive power of the State. It is the characteristic of civilised communities that direct physical coercion is (with some limitations) the prerogative of the State, and the Law is a set of rules according to which the State exercises this prerogative in dealing with its own citizens". Here, we can understand his "direct physical coercion" to include not only torture but police brutality, war (including the violence it brings to combatants and non-combatants alike), and the death penalty. Most of these things are done legally because it is the prerogative of the state which makes its own laws. Torture, though illegal according to the U.N. Charter of Human Rights and many international treaties, is the only form of violence which is exercised merely as a form of total control over an individual. This key characteristic of totalitarianism comes from the corrupting influence of unchecked power. As Dostoyesky (a former prisoner) once said, "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons." While this quote could easily apply to modern-day America, we could paraphrase it by saying "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by how those in power treat those without power." If the answer is to torture with impunity, then we are no longer living in civilization but in hell.