



None of Us Were Like This Before: American Soldiers and Torture

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Sergeant Adam Gray made it home from Iraq only to die in his barracks. For more than three years, reporter Joshua E. S. Phillips—with the support of Adam's mother and several of his Army buddies—investigated Adam's death. What Phillips uncovered was a story of American veterans psychologically scarred by the abuse they had meted out to Iraqi prisoners.

How did US forces turn to torture? Phillips's narrative recounts the journey of a tank battalion—trained for conventional combat—as its focus switches to guerrilla war and prisoner detention. It tells of how a group of ordinary soldiers, ill trained for the responsibilities foisted upon them, descended into the degradation of abuse. The location is far from CIA prisons and Guantanamo, but the story captures the widespread use and nature of torture in the US armed forces.

Based on firsthand reporting from the Middle East, as well as interviews with soldiers, their families and friends, military officials, and the victims of torture, *None of Us Were Like This Before* reveals how soldiers, senior officials, and the US public came to believe that torture was both effective and necessary. The book illustrates that the damaging legacy of torture is not only borne by the detainees, but also by American soldiers and the country to which they've returned.

None of Us Were Like This Before: American Soldiers and Torture Details

Date : Published June 14th 2010 by Verso

ISBN : 9781844675999

Author : Joshua E.S. Phillips

Format : Hardcover 256 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, War, Military Fiction, Sociology, History, Politics, Psychology

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John says

Let me start by pasting in my writeup on the author's book-signing in Tacoma, WA:

11/19/11 - Journalist and author **Joshua Phillips** has written a book about torture entitled “None of Us Were Like This Before: Reflections on American Soldiers and Torture”. He delivered a lecture on 11/16 at the UW Tacoma campus, sponsored in part by VFP.

Lamenting the use of torture by American and allied forces in the “War on Terror”, Phillips wishes to promote deeper public discussion of the issue. He began his talk by referring to a recent Presidential debate in which Republican hopefuls promised to reinstate an official policy of torture. According to Phillips, public support for government-sanctioned torture has risen lately in the polls. Given this trend, he says, it is easy to see that a change in presidents or another 9-11 attack would likely result in a regression back to reinstatement.

Phillips discussed rationalizations used by torture apologists, who claim that torture is effective, that it has prevented terrorist attacks, and that its use by the US is limited. Phillips counters these claims on their own terms: Far from being an effective tool, torture is actually an impediment to intelligence gathering. It forces fake confessions, and destroys the trust between the intelligence community and the local populace. And there is no evidence to support the notion that a terrorist attack has been prevented through the use of torture.

The claim of limited US torture “use”, Phillips says, is a specious form of denial referring solely to the CIA waterboarding program, -- ignoring the widespread problem in the military forces.

Torture is employed by many governments, both despotic and democratic, but democracies, Phillips says, have learned to get away with torture by avoiding leaving marks and traces. His book, however, is not hypothetical, but a rigorous journalistic investigation incorporating testimony of involved soldiers and victims.

Several hundred incidents of torture involving US soldiers in the recent wars have been recorded, but Phillips’s research reveals a far bigger problem. Some of this activity was ordered by superiors, some encouraged or tolerated, and some in violation of regulations. The Bush administration’s non-compliance with Geneva accords, and other pro-torture memos, were a significant step toward loosening the taboo. But because of a leadership failure, US forces were already practicing torture before any of these authorizations.

As anyone can well imagine, the reasons for the spread of torture can vary considerably. In many cases, combat soldiers in the war zones were given responsibility of extracting “actionable” information from detainees, even though they had no training as interrogators. Detainees, not charged, were held under suspicion, often misinformed. Unrealistic deadlines were set for confessions, to extract information that didn’t exist, such as where the WMD’s were.

A lack of moral leadership in the command structure was a significant factor. Sometimes looking the other way was as harmful as giving explicit orders. “Soldiers didn’t need manuals or memos to lead them to

torture,” says Phillips. “US troops in Bagram tortured their prisoners in banal and crude ways, informed by myths and memory.” Motivation for torture can range from peer-pressure to anger (i.e. revenge for 9/11), and even boredom.

Witnesses who report on unsanctioned use of torture can expect to pay for their whistle-blowing. As an example, Phillips cites the case of the soldier who revealed the Abu Graib scandal: He was subject to subsequent death threats and had to be given a secret identity. This sent a powerful message out to anyone else inclined to come forward.

Soldiers involved in torture, Phillips says, typically are haunted by remorse and guilt which affects their mental health. Afraid to talk about their involvement, they have nowhere to turn, and are at high risk for depression, drug-addiction and suicide. Often, being able to talk about their experiences is therapeutic, but sometimes even that is not enough, as in the example of one soldier interviewed by Phillips who later took his own life.

In the lecture, Phillips preferred to confront the torture problem without widening the discussion to the overall evils of war. Some people in the audience seemed to disagree with this position. However, since many people who believe some wars, such as WWII, are justified, it is probably wise strategy to limit the focus to the issue of torture itself.

During the question-and-answer period, when Phillips stated that under the right circumstances, anyone could become a perpetrator, some in the audience took offence. But history has shown, from Nazi Germany through Vietnam and beyond, that ordinary people, in a paradigm of war or violence, can become involved in evil. This is the meaning of the soldier’s words that provided the title of the book.

B.A. says

This is a tremendous book. I wasn't sure if it would work when I first picked it up. Reading torture isn't really something that I'm eager to do. I also thought I had a solid understanding of the issue. I was skeptical when I started reading the book, and was frankly unsure that it would hold my interest. The structure isn't a standard formula for non-fiction narratives. I have to say, I was blown away by it.

I learned that I hadn't really understood how torture & abuse emerged in the American context. One of the things that I love about the book is that it's not at all aimed at condemning soldiers or the military, although the author could've easily veered in that direction. It's not heavy handed at all. Instead, the author carefully deconstructs all of the complex factors that led young men to engage in abusive acts (Phillips is careful not to overuse the word "torture" as well, which I really appreciate - in a way it becomes too easy to throw it around). Nor does he apportion blame. If you carefully read this book, you'll understand where the blame should lie. I've found a lot of books on this topic to be dogmatic and preachy - a kind of pseudo-philosophical exercise masquerading as journalism. Thankfully, this book does NOT belong to that canon. So, it's especially welcome and refreshing to read something like this; it's very fair, thoughtful, and dispassionately written. More than that, I found myself getting sucked into the narratives. The main overarching narrative is gripping and powerful, but the other small strands, or mini-narratives are equally strong, and illuminating. The range that the book covers is especially impressive. I was especially drawn to some of the

"discoveries" the book made in the latter chapters (although some of what the book uncovers in the early chapters was also quite surprising - shocking, at times).

When I was done, I felt like I had just finished a perfectly prepared and proportional meal. It was satisfying, fulfilling, but not too filling. It also helped me reconsider many ideas I held onto about torture and abuse during the global war on terror. I honestly didn't expect to finish reading the book cover to cover. I strongly suggest that others consider peering inside of the cover. You might be equally surprised, and delighted by what you find. It's not always an easy read, but it's definitely quite worthwhile. Even if you're squeamish about reading weighty topics, or engaging in work about violence, you really won't regret reading this.

Patrick says

Well-written investigation of why US soldiers abused and tortured detainees in Afghanistan, Iraq and Guantanamo, and the lasting effects on the tortured and the torturers.

Justin Norman says

I've read a lot of books about US torture and there is a lot of overlap between them, but each one has their own unique information, and this one had an interesting focus on the effects of torture on the soldiers who committed the acts. Clearly a thoroughly researched book, and well worth the read if you can stomach the material.

Sally Ooms says

A reporter's account of torture inflicted on Iraqi prisoners by members of the American military who were inconceivably transformed from regular soldiers to "detention specialists." The scars were not reserved for the detainees but permanently devastated the perpetrators. Post-Iraqi War soldiers are on a rocky road, often making it impossible to feel the same way they did about their lives in America when they shipped away. As in Finding Home, the soldier's act of coming home equals severely altered reality.

Cymric says

Torture results when young men are sent to a country where they are given too much power, guns and nothing to do for weeks on end. Modern "wars" are not about soldiers on a battlefield; rather they are about soldiers occupying a country the powers-that-be have deemed "of strategic interest", and picking up random civilians and torturing them. Harrowing, disturbing, but that's the reality and someone needed to reveal it.

Sleepless says

Gosh, I have so much work to do but I've got to write this review (also Photoshop refuses to function and

man, my head hurts too much to do math).

Anyway, this book is incredibly important. It took me a while to finish it because it was hard to read, hard to grasp that this is real.

I can't stop thinking about how the army is essentially the hands of the country and the government is the brain. That soldiers should be doing so many good things that they'll go back to their country with pride. When I say good things, I mean that type of actions that it's hard to argue against their morality (of course, like, you could but why?). And man, I can't believe that I've never heard about these issues like this. I mean, yeah, I knew about Guantanamo Bay but all the torture in between is new to me.

I think you should read this book because we need to know that it happened, that so many died and got hurt, that this was this huge circle of pain because of policies (spoken and unspoken ones) within the army and those in charge of security.

Okay, my work is calling me. All in all, definitely recommend, we've got to face these things.

What I'm Taking with Me

- War is bad. Obviously.
 - I hate the idea of armies so much.
 - This was so well researched, they did a good job.
-

Kaplan312 says

This is easily the best book I've read on the issue of US torture during the war on terror, and definitely one of the strongest narrative nonfiction books I've picked up in quite some time.

The author makes it easy to read a book on such a difficult topic. His writing style is elegant and robust - I saw that another review said "dispassionate," which is spot on, especially in the difficult passages. The reporting and research is thoughtful, careful, and penetrating. It's a terrific blend of investigative reporting and literary journalistic writing.

Most of all it's a book that's guided through curious desire to understand how US forces turned to abuse and torture, and some of the unrecognized costs of these policies and practices. The ending is devastating, but powerful - and important. In the end, one walks away from the book with a strong, richer, illuminated understanding of the issue - an a visceral reaction to torture on a level that one might not expect. I cannot recommend this book more strongly. I hope someone makes it into a movie, too!

Madeline says

A truly thoughtful book, gracefully written, guided by a inquisitiveness to understand how American forces became involved in torture, and the myriad unsuspecting costs of doing so. Not easy to read at times, not because of the violence but from the tragedy of the tale. Should be considered for National Book Award, or on Oprah's shelf.

Terri says

What can I say? Powerful, shocking, memorable, anger inducing, disgust inducing, excellently done, 5 star, a must read. Yes, a 'must' read. A must read for all Americans and anyone who wants to acknowledge that the truth about detainee abuse did not come out with Abu Ghraib. That was only scraping the top of the shitheap.

Louise says

I thought this would be about the troops and how they would become/became different than they were "before". While the book began with a narrative putting a human face on the implied content, this seemed to be dropped. What followed were 50+ pages of accounts of torture and the winks and nods from the higher ups. If you've been following the news and reading blogs the names and places are different, but you've read this story before.

I'm glad I stayed with it, because some very good material follows.

The author shows the culture that brought this about. There are young, angry soldiers, not trained in interrogation techniques who are charged with getting information. There are memos from those very high up with vague guidance on how to get it. There are interviews that show how innocent people wound up under interrogation and estimates of how many were wrongly imprisoned.

This book helped me understand the scale of what went on. Abuse was much more prevalent than even alternative news sources report.

The Millgram and Zimbardo studies are referenced and there are discussions on movies and the TV series "24".

Interviews of whistle blowers show how difficult (career-killing and potentially lethal) it was/is to report on the abuse and on how the Abu Ghraib pictures became public. There is something of the legal standing of the tortured and the risks torturers (as well as whistle-blowers as noted above) face in going public.

The book is short and topics sometimes seem to come from the information at hand rather than a systematic look at the issue. Nevertheless, there is a lot of good information and perspective.

In the end, the author, returns to the topic implied in the title, and through personal stories shows the problems of the torturer when the thrust back into a civilian life.

Jetdrvr says

I'm completely fed up with stories in the liberal press and books about torture supposedly conducted by American troops. We are up against a fanatical enemy sworn to destroy us and people like this writer want us to handle them with kid gloves, when they routinely torture and behead our people? To hell with this! We are in a war for our very survival. War is ugly. Nasty. Brutal. If you want a kid glove war, then don't fight the

damned thing in the first place. Our military is at war. America is at the mall. There is no place for Mr. Nice Guy when dealing with savages. The only thing they understand is brutal force applied directly. Anything else is second best and those who come in second best in wars are called *losers.*

Joanna Jiang says

This is an incredible documentation of American Torture in the Middle East and Vietnam. The truth of the matter is suppressed; we associate it with prisons such as Guantanamo Bay and turn a blind eye to the torture carried out by military forces. *No one signs up for this.* These are young men (and women; I presume, though I can't recall if Phillips interviewed any female interrogators) who are psychologically coerced into carrying out inhumane procedures which come in direct conflict with Human Rights and the basis of their own country. It's amazing how war continues to toss all the charters, bills, and rule books out the window.

Phillips writes with a very frank tone; he doesn't embellish, because really, *None of Us Were Like This Before* is an exposé. Still, the text itself is easy to read, however discomfoting the content is. Some sick part of me powered through this one. I wanted to know *why* even though I was already aware of the manifest parallels with other cases in history involving corruption, miscommunication, and blind obedience. I wanted to know that Phillips's book is changing the situation, that after its release, the military was forced to begin removing torture from their interrogation "culture" (can I call it that?).

"I wouldn't have any problems. I wouldn't be on fucking medication. I wouldn't be sitting here doing an interview because I wouldn't know anything, and I would be fucking living life out there," Daniel Keller of Battalion 1-68 tells Phillips. "I thought being a soldier was this honorable and noble thing. You're doing a job that not many other people can do so that other people don't have to."

Kyle says

I can't joke about this one. There were ideas playing out in my head as I read this, but when it comes to putting it down, just about any play seemed too uncaring. So here it is.

Phillips puts together a collection of stories and essays, some journalistic, some observational, about U.S. soldiers involved in torture during the war in Afghanistan and Iraq. His whole research is kicked off by a story he covered about an Afghan war vet who committed suicide after returning home, unable to deal with the torture in his past. Phillips digs through the lives of people to try to get at the questions of how it happened, why we allowed it, and why we accept the explanations that are given about a few "bad apples" in the incidents like at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere; more importantly, he touches on what torture does to us as humans, and as a country.

It's likely most of us know someone who is involved with or lost someone because of the war, but wounds built on torture run deeper in here, and take longer to heal. I have to admit, I picked this book up mostly out of curiosity, and to that end, Phillips gave me some of what I needed. I feel like this is a conflict that is very much more "over there" than others, but this really made me realize some of what might go on when people just aren't watching.

I'm grateful for his journalist's viewpoint through a lot of the book. Though it's fairly obvious where he's

coming from (and at times he lays it on thick in a “they said this, but I’ll just leave these contrary facts/opinions without comment here in this next paragraph” way), he does try to keep some balance. He doesn’t demonize people outright, but lets them speak for themselves. Actually, he pulls off the toughest part of this act: humanizing soldiers who tortured detainees out of frustration, misplaced patriotism, and sometimes boredom. He clearly did hours upon hours of interviews with a lot of his sources, and poured over other academic and news sources.

I have two major problems with the book. The first one in some ways can’t be helped. Regardless of how much he asks “how” and “why,” Phillips gives some possible ideas as to how things happened, and who is responsible for the atrocities, but comes short of actually calling fault to anyone. It’s a classic news strategy, but so frustrating and at times outright upsetting in comparison to the things that happened without being able to see how we ended up here. In part, there is just no real solid answer. In another part, Phillips is obviously not going to get anyone with authority to take blame or do much more than point out scapegoats to talk. Pretty much the most jarring segment of the book compares the interviews of a few low-level soldiers who came forward to the responses from the upper echelons, each almost completely incongruous with the other. Phillips was not going to get an answer from the start, and he likely set out knowing that; without a conclusion, he has to rely on stories from his interviews for resolution that will not make the situation any better.

The second major problem is the layout of the book. I admit I’m not the most assiduous reader, but whole segments of this book were just obtuse, which is hard to do with non-fiction. Phillips writes at times like a blogger (casually, using first and third person to include his observations), at times a journalist (last names only, with other signifiers listed only once at first mention; quick sentences without modifiers), and at times an academic essayist (thesis, fact/fact/fact). It’s difficult to parse sometimes, and once or twice I was sent back a couple pages to try to figure out which sources he was referencing where, and how this was being interpreted through him before it got to me. The book is divided into chapters, but it’s clear he had more information about some events than others – more than one chapter has “padding” between an opening anecdote and its conclusion. I’m not certain why he didn’t break the book into larger, more general sections. He has pages of footnotes, but they accumulate in the back of the book; for a topic so heavily reliant on reports and sources, I don’t understand why those footnotes aren’t immediately available at the bottom of the page. If I have to reference the back of the book three times on the same page, I feel I’m doing too much work to read it.

I know I’m making it sound like a disappointing read, but Phillips does have a strong work here, at times moving and upsetting. Ultimately, maybe the disappointment is more that a book like this had to be written at all.

Ronando says

Phillips opens a window for us to see into the hearts and minds of some (many?) of our own soldiers as they digress into torture which the tacit, if not blatant support from their superiors, all the way up to Donald Rumsfeld. As an ex-infantry soldier, trained to kill behind enemy lines, (though not having seen combat), I am appalled at the depths our own have fallen.

This is a black mark on our troops, our government, our nation and us as a people who are either silent, ignorant or in support about such abuse that should not be happening. We are better than this. We should strive to be better than this.

"How did US forces turn to torture? Phillips's narrative recount the journey of a tank battalion - trained for conventional combat - as its focus switches to guerrilla war and prisoner detention."

The book "tells of how a group of ordinary soldiers, ill trained for the responsibilities foisted upon them, descended into the degradation of abuse....the story captures the widespread use and nature of torture in the US armed forces."

"The book illustrates that the damaging legacy of torture is not only borne by the detainees, but also by American soldiers and the country to which they've returned."
