An Afterword

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When the images of Abu Ghraib burst into the world's view in the spring of 2004, as an experienced investigator and interrogator, I asked myself "What were they thinking?" In graduate school years later, while studying the uses of torture by governments fighting terrorists and insurgents I contemplated the question, "What do they think now?"

In 2010 I was approved by the University of St. Andrews to conduct the Detainee Interaction Study to examine the individual experiences of Americans who observed, objected to, or took part in Abusive Violence[1] during the post-9/11 Counter-Terrorism and Counter-Insurgency campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere around the globe. The Abu Ghraib scandal that emerged in 2004, and later tales of detainee abuse and unintended deaths that leaked out of Afghanistan and Iraq gave some reasons to hope that the study could find veterans with similar experiences who might be willing to participate.

The study was designed to answer three primary questions:

- Why did Abusive Violence seem to make sense at the time?
- How were techniques of Abusive Violence learned and chosen for use?
- What did the veterans now think of their experiences involving Abusive Violence long after returning from war?

The expected rarity of the events, and the probable hesitancy to disclose and discuss personal involvement in episodes of Abusive Violence, made obvious that we could not expect to have a large enough sample size to try to document findings of generalizable statistical importance. If we were to be successful at all, we could expect only to find what the personal lived experiences of a small number of individual veterans had been. Finding out what it was like to be in the moment and presence of Abusive Violence was what we aimed to document, interpret and analyze.

I thought that learning why Americans roughed up detainees, or subjected them to the so-called "Enhanced Interrogation Techniques" of stress positions and water-boarding would help social researchers identify factors at the level of individuals that might illuminate what had been explained away by the American military as Abu Ghraib's "Animal House on the night shift." Little did I suspect that the study would find such fertile, dark and rich material as it subsequently unearthed.

I spent many months searching for potential participants, sending hundreds of inquiries to veteran's organizations, setting up a website to explain the study to veteran's (and their loved ones), and reaching out to university veteran's support offices. Prior to conducting any interviews I held several conversations with each participant, and spent nearly five hours over a couple of days building

[1] As used in the Detainee Interaction Study, the term "Abusive Violence" referred to treatment of detainees and others who were not immediate physical threats to American or allied personnel.

rapport, gaining trust, and generally getting a sense of the veterans as human beings. Interviews then took place over multiple sessions, averaging more than four hours per veteran.

Occasionally, I've been asked whether the information provided by the participants can be trusted. Ultimately, I can only offer assurances based upon the fact that the research design was overseen by a highly experienced qualitative researcher and that I was not a naïve graduate student carrying out my very first field interviews. In a prior career, which spanned some twenty-four years, I received training as a criminal investigative interviewer, interrogator, and criminal intelligence analyst. I conducted, supervised, and managed thousands of investigations and completed more than two hundred suspect interrogations. Most of my investigations dealt with financial fraud, embezzlement and organized theft rings. While working with the participants and processing their transcripts I brought all of my training, experience, and academic subject matter knowledge to bear. Could I have been misled by participants? It's possible, but so can any researcher, whether doing interview-based research or compiling the results of surveys and polls. I can say that the obvious difficulty participants had relating certain fraught details of their experiences, the internal consistency of their accounts over hours and hours of interview, and the reasons they supplied for their actions appeared consistent with those of persons I had interviewed in the past whose information proved reliable. Additionally, in many instances the subjective experiences related by one veteran were echoed in the accounts of others.

My first interview for the Detainee Interaction Study started out much as I'd anticipated. The young veteran told me about his boyhood in a military family that had instilled in him a deep appreciation for the sacrifices of earlier generations. His father's Viet Nam war experiences and his mother's own military service early on sparked his imagination to join what he wryly called the "family business." The 9/11 attacks cemented that desire and he contracted to be inducted into the military immediately after graduating from high school.

Right after completing training, he joined an infantry battalion headed to Iraq in a few months. The squad he was assigned to was made up mostly of veterans who had been part of the initial invasion. He was anxious to measure up to their estimation of what made a good combat soldier: courage, loyalty, and willingness to do whatever was necessary to complete the mission. Some of the veterans told him dark stories of what some of the "necessary" measures entailed.

Before leaving for Iraq, the squad leader called the men together to talk specifically about the Abu Ghraib scandal and what had undone the soldiers there. He said that the military police troops at Abu Ghraib were absolute idiots for taking pictures of the abuse. It was also the consensus that what the pictures showed was both senseless and pretty lame. The squad leader laid down the law: the squad would do what it had to do, but there would be no photos. The young soldier and the combat veterans readily agreed. As the meeting broke up the soldier's mind returned to yearning for the deployment to begin. The next day he boarded the plane headed to a country filled with an insurgency that was already regularly killing American soldiers in ambush and roadside bomb attacks.

To that point the story was much as I'd expected from my interviews. I thought that perhaps the soldier had seen some abuse against detainees and would be guarded about what he had done in the heat of combat. As it turned out, he spoke with candor and openness that surprised and gave details that shocked.

Over the following four hours he told me about losing his idealistic hope to help gift to the Iraqi people the benefits of American-style democracy and how the desperate struggle to survive and help his friends make it home had made dispensing with civilized norms an easy choice. He and his squad-mates tortured, maimed and killed Iraqis thought to have information about the insurgency. They used captured insurgent fighters as human shields while retreating under fire. After furious battles they enacted frenzied abuse upon captives, including mutilations intended to forever mark the victims as fighters vanquished by Americans. Their abuse of Iraqis did not only happen when their passions were aroused by combat. Sometimes they abused out of boredom, or even curiosity to try their hands at a technique they had heard about. They kidnapped and water-boarded a passing Iraqi man for exactly those reasons, releasing him when finished.

The veteran told me about coming home from the war to find himself unable to return to a normal existence. He drank himself insensible most nights, and became surly and prone to angry outbursts. He eventually became such a problem that he was kicked out of the military, without any access to veteran's benefits. As a civilian the alcohol binging continued, and he often passed out at home with a loaded gun in his lap. His room-mates were certain that they would find him dead by his own hand.

Sitting with me he described the years-long process of coming to terms with what he had done in willing service to his country. The soldier's own motivation to strike a blow against the insurgency, the violence-inclined dynamic within the squad, and the direction of military superiors to get information "by any means possible," impelled the young soldier to act without restraint when he committed terrible abuses while questioning a captive. In the silence of the interview room he paused to describe what it had felt like. His words were drawn out, and in the tones of someone recalling and recognizing his emotions for the first time. He told me that he had felt a "unique and wonderful feeling." The ability to prolong or end suffering and the power over life and death combined to feed a perverse pleasure in a young soldier barely out of his teens. In the years since, he realized that the mission could have been achieved without much of the violence, and none of the sadism, which he and his squad employed.

He lives with regret and tries to not allow the memories to dominate his every day existence. Speaking with other veterans, including his father, has helped him to stay ahead of those memories. He has not fully escaped the sights, sounds, and smells from his war, but time and a life of work, children and love, have helped move Iraq for the most part to the edges of his consciousness.

At the end of that interview I realized that the stories from the veterans deserved not merely analysis and interpretation, but a voice to speak to the citizens of the country that sent those veterans to fight the Global War on Terror. When Jeffrey Murer told me about Rod Coover's interest in creating a multi-media experience for users to gain insight into some of the experiences revealed in the Detainee Interaction Study, I was immediately intrigued. In working with them and Scott Rettberg I developed a sense that they would honor the trust the veterans gave me that their stories would be treated respectfully and shared with others. In this I was correct.

Hearts and Minds: The Interrogation Project is a first attempt to lend voice to some of the veterans' stories. We can listen, we can connect spoken words to images and symbols, and then maybe we will be able to start to understand causes and consequences via the masterful work of the Project in ways that the less immediate medium of text cannot allow.

Individuals who experience *Hearts and Minds* come away emotionally and intellectually provoked. It is quite something for the audience to listen to ordinary-sounding voices sharing what it is like to experience the subjective reality of abusive violence. Voices capture and hold our attention. In the absence of film of the speaker, we have to concentrate and actively imagine the human being whose life is being shared with us. We co-create the experience of the performance; we listeners and the animators, actors, scriptwriters, visual artists, and of course the veterans, collaborate to move, shock, and stun us. We have a need to process, discuss, and share our reactions to what we have experienced.

In my experience, helping people to reveal their secrets is in the end an exercise in empathy and human connection far more than one of anger, power and fear. Knowing that within each of us lies the potential for great compassion, and great evil, allows for the recognition that the other person can teach us something of their experiences, motives, emotions, and regrets. When we come to the task of social science research interviewing or criminal interrogating with this mindset, we are, I think, more likely to make easy the way for the other to share what we are seeking from them. This is not to say that we allow our empathy to ensnare our critical faculties. Rather, we should recall that understanding the other does not mean that we approve of what he has done. We must instead subject what we have been told to intense and clear-headed consideration as we verify, analyze, and try to draw useful conclusions for future action.

In my opinion it is a crucial requirement of a democracy to examine its history, especially when that history involves war's horrors visited upon other people *and* the sons and daughters we send to fight. It is a simple thing to cynically mouth "bad things happen in war," and then look away. As citizens of the country that prosecuted the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan it is indecent to do so. When difficult truths are revealed, our sons and daughters deserve for us to strive to understand:

> "What were they thinking?" "What do they think now?"

Afterwards perhaps we can turn our thoughts to "How do we prevent this from happening again?"