

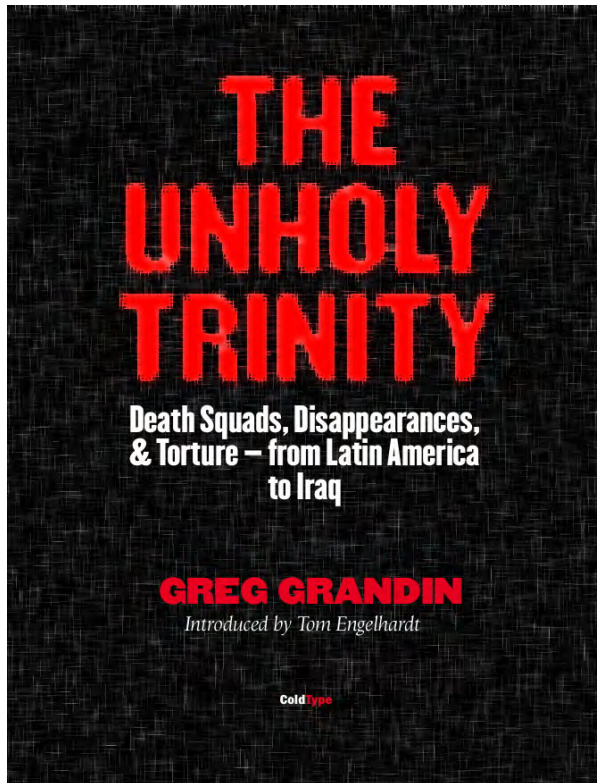
# THE UNHOLY TRINITY

**Death Squads, Disappearances,  
& Torture – from Latin America  
to Iraq**

**GREG GRANDIN**

*Introduced by Tom Engelhardt*

**ColdType**



**Greg Grandin** is the author of a number of books, most recently *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*. He teaches history at NYU.

Copyright 2007 Greg Grandin

This essay originally appeared at <http://tomdispatch.com>

**ColdType**

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD  
[www.coldtype.net](http://www.coldtype.net)

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Tom Engelhardt**

In a recent issue of The Wall Street Journal, reporter Siobhan Gorman offered a striking little portrait of Jose A. Rodriguez, who, in 2005, as chief of the CIA's National Clandestine Service, ordered the destruction of those "hundreds of hours" of CIA videotapes of the... Now, what do we want to call it? Gorman refers to "extreme techniques" of interrogation (putting the two words in quotes), then repeats the phrase a second time later in the piece without the quotes: "... [Rodriguez] took a careful approach to controversial practices such as renditions – sending detainees to countries that use more extreme interrogation methods..."). In this mini-portrait of Rodriguez, as painted by his colleagues, and of the disappeared videos, the word "torture" is never used, but don't blame Gorman. As Greg Mitchell of Editor & Publisher pointed out recently, she's hardly alone. "One Associated Press article referred simply to 'interrogation' on the tapes, at one point putting 'enhanced interrogation' in quotes. Another AP article called it 'harsh interrogation.' Mark Mazzetti in The New York Times used 'severe interrogation methods.' Eric Lichtblau in the same paper chose the same phrase. David Johnston, in an article for [the] paper's web site, referred to 'aggressive interrogations' and 'coercive techniques.' Reuters, in its lead, relied on 'severe interrogation techniques.' Dan Eggen and Joby Warrick in The Washington Post opted for 'harsh interrogation tactics.'"

Whatever is on those tapes, we've come a long way, baby, since, in Medieval times in Europe, waterboarding was crudely known as "the water torture."

In any case, Rodriguez, according to his colleagues, turns out to be for the little guy – or the little torturer, anyway. He supposedly destroyed those videos so that "lower-level officers would[n't] take the fall" for the high-level ones who dished out the orders. But there's a slight catch in the text. What if some higher-level ones might have been in danger of taking the fall as well?

Here's Gorman's money passage, just dropped into the middle of the piece without further explanation or discussion: "One former official said interrogators' faces were visible on at least one video, as were those of more senior officers who happened to be visiting." Happened? Visiting? Keep in mind that we're talking about CIA officials in a torture cham-

## **GREG GRANDIN | THE UNHOLY TRINITY**

ber, not tourists at a local landmark.

Then again, for background, Gorman offers this on Rodriguez: He is, she writes, "a product of what one former agency colleague called 'the rough-and-tumble' Latin American division" of the CIA from the 1980s. "Rough and tumble"? You won't find out what that means from her column, but just keep reading this post. In our period, men like Rodriguez, under the leadership of George W. Bush, have essentially globalized those "rough and tumble" methods of the CIA's Latin American division. As Greg Grandin – whose superb book, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*, nails those "rough-and-tumble" years – points out, they have turned the "unholy trinity" that the U.S. developed in Latin America into a global operation.



## **THE UNHOLY TRINITY**

**Greg Grandin**

**T**he world is made up, as Captain Segura in Graham Greene's 1958 novel *Our Man in Havana* put it, of two classes: the torturable and the untorturable. "There are people," Segura explained, "who expect to be tortured and others who would be outraged by the idea." Then – so Greene thought – Catholics, particularly Latin American Catholics, were more torturable than Protestants. Now, of course, Muslims hold that distinction, victims of a globalized network of offshore and outsourced imprisonment coordinated by Washington and knitted together by secret flights, concentration camps, and black-site detention centers. The CIA's deployment of Orwellian "Special Removal Units" to kidnap terror suspects in Europe, Canada, the Middle East, and elsewhere and the whisking of these "ghost prisoners" off to Third World countries to be tortured goes, today, by the term "extraordinary rendition," a hauntingly apt phrase. "To render" means not just to hand over, but to extract the essence of a thing, as well as to hand out a verdict and "give in return or retribution" – good descriptions of what happens during torture sessions.

In the decades after Greene wrote *Our Man in Havana*, Latin Americans coined an equally resonant word to describe the terror that had come to reign over most of the continent. Throughout the second half of the Cold War, Washington's anti-communist allies killed more than 300,000 civilians, many of whom were simply *desaparecido* – "disappeared." The expression was already well known in Latin America when, on accepting his 1982 Nobel Prize for Literature in Sweden, Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez reported that the region's "disappeared number nearly one hundred and twenty thousand, which is as if suddenly no one could account for all the inhabitants of Uppsala."

When Latin Americans used the word as a verb, they usually did so in a way considered grammatically incorrect – in the transitive form and often in the passive voice, as in "she was disappeared." The implied (but absent) actor/subject signaled that everybody knew the government was responsible, even while investing that government with unspeakable, omnipotent power. The disappeared left behind families and friends who spent their energies dealing with labyrinthine bureaucracies, only to be met with silence or told that their

## GREG GRANDIN | THE UNHOLY TRINITY

missing relative probably went to Cuba, joined the guerrillas, or ran away with a lover. The victims were often not the most politically active, but the most popular, and were generally chosen to ensure that their sudden absence would generate a chilling ripple-effect.

### AN UNHOLY TRINITY

Like rendition, disappearances can't be carried out without a synchronized, sophisticated, and increasingly transnational infrastructure, which, back in the 1960s and 1970s, the United States was instrumental in creating. In fact, it was in Latin America that the CIA and U.S. military intelligence agents, working closely with local allies, first helped put into place the unholy trinity of government-sponsored terrorism now on display in Iraq and elsewhere: death squads, disappearances, and torture.

**Death Squads:** Clandestine paramilitary units, nominally independent from established security agencies yet able to draw on the intelligence and logistical capabilities of those agencies, are the building blocks for any effective system of state terror. In Latin America, Washington supported the assassination of suspected Leftists at least as early as 1954, when the CIA successfully carried out a coup in Guatemala, which ousted a democratically elected president. But its first sustained sponsorship of death squads started in 1962 in Colombia, a country which then vied with Vietnam for Washington's attention.

Having just ended a brutal 10-year civil war, its newly consolidated political leadership, facing a still unruly peasantry, turned to the U.S. for help. In 1962, the Kennedy White House sent General William Yarborough, later better known for being the "Father of the Green Berets" (as well as for directing domestic military surveillance of prominent civil-rights activists, including Martin Luther King Jr.). Yarborough advised the Colombian government to set up an irregular unit to "execute paramilitary, sabotage and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents" – as good a description of a death squad as any.

As historian Michael McClintock puts it in his indispensable book *Instruments of Statecraft*, Yarborough left behind a "virtual blueprint" for creating military-directed death squads. This was, thanks to U.S. aid and training, immediately implemented. The use of such death squads would become part of what the counterinsurgency theorists of the era liked to call "counter-terror" – a concept hard to define since it so closely mirrored the practices it sought to contest.

Throughout the 1960s, Latin America and Southeast Asia functioned as the two primary laboratories for U.S. counterinsurgents, who moved back and forth between the regions, applying insights and fine-tuning tactics. By the early 1960s, death-squad executions were a

## **GREG GRANDIN | THE UNHOLY TRINITY**

standard feature of U.S. counterinsurgency strategy in Vietnam, soon to be consolidated into the infamous Phoenix Program, which between 1968 and 1972 "neutralized" more than 80,000 Vietnamese – 26,369 of whom were "permanently eliminated."

As in Latin America, so too in Vietnam, the point of death squads was not just to eliminate those thought to be working with the enemy, but to keep potential rebel sympathizers in a state of fear and anxiety. To do so, the U.S. Information Service in Saigon provided thousands of copies of a flyer printed with a ghostly looking eye. The "terror squads" then deposited that eye on the corpses of those they murdered or pinned it "on the doors of houses suspected of occasionally harboring Viet Cong agents." The technique was called "phrasing the threat" – a way to generate a word-of-mouth terror buzz.

In Guatemala, such a tactic started up at roughly the same time. There, a "white hand" was left on the body of a victim or the door of a potential one.

**Disappearances:** Next up on the counterinsurgency curriculum was Central America, where, in the 1960s, U.S. advisors helped put into place the infrastructure needed not just to murder but "disappear" large numbers of civilians. In the wake of the Cuban Revolution, Washington had set out to "professionalize" Latin America's security agencies – much in the way the Bush administration now works to "modernize" the intelligence systems of its allies in the President's "Global War on Terror."

Then, as now, the goal was to turn lethargic, untrained intelligence units of limited range into an international network capable of gathering, analyzing, sharing, and acting on information in a quick and efficient manner. American advisors helped coordinate the work of the competing branches of a country's security forces, urging military men and police officers to overcome differences and cooperate. Washington supplied phones, teletype machines, radios, cars, guns, ammunition, surveillance equipment, explosives, cattle prods, cameras, typewriters, carbon paper, and filing cabinets, while instructing its apprentices in the latest riot control, record keeping, surveillance, and mass-arrest techniques.

In neither El Salvador, nor Guatemala was there even a whiff of serious rural insurrection when the Green Berets, the CIA, and the U.S. Agency for International Development began organizing the first security units that would metastasize into a dense, Central American-wide network of death-squad paramilitaries.

Once created, death squads operated under their own colorful names – an Eye for an Eye, the Secret Anticommunist Army, the White Hand – yet were essentially appendages of the very intelligence systems that Washington either helped create or fortified. As in Vietnam, care was taken to make sure that paramilitaries appeared to be unaffiliated with regular forces. To allow for a plausible degree of deniability, the "elimination of the [enemy] agents

## **GREG GRANDIN | THE UNHOLY TRINITY**

must be achieved quickly and decisively" – instructs a classic 1964 textbook *Counter-Insurgency Warfare* – "by an organization that must in no way be confused with the counterinsurgent personnel working to win the support of the population." But in Central America, by the end of the 1960s, the bodies were piling so high that even State Department embassy officials, often kept out of the loop on what their counterparts in the CIA and the Pentagon were up to, had to admit to the obvious links between US-backed intelligence services and the death squads.

Washington, of course, publicly denied its support for paramilitarism, but the practice of political disappearances took a great leap forward in Guatemala in 1966 with the birth of a death squad created, and directly supervised, by U.S. security advisors. Throughout the first two months of 1966, a combined black-ops unit made up of police and military officers working under the name "Operation Clean-Up" – a term US counterinsurgents would recycle elsewhere in Latin America – carried out a number of extrajudicial executions.

Between March 3rd and 5th of that year, the unit netted its largest catch. More than 30 Leftists were captured, interrogated, tortured, and executed. Their bodies were then placed in sacks and dropped into the Pacific Ocean from U.S.-supplied helicopters. Despite pleas from Guatemala's archbishop and more than 500 petitions of habeas corpus filed by relatives, the Guatemalan government and the American Embassy remained silent on the fate of the executed.

Over the next two and a half decades, U.S.-funded and trained Central American security forces would disappear tens of thousands of citizens and execute hundreds of thousands more. When supporters of the "War on Terror" advocated the exercise of the "Salvador Option," it was this slaughter they were talking about.

Following U.S.-backed coups in Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina, death squads not only became institutionalized in South America, they became transnational. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, the CIA supported Operation Condor – an intelligence consortium established by Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet that synchronized the activities of many of the continent's security agencies and orchestrated an international campaign of terror and murder.

According to Washington's ambassador to Paraguay, the heads of these agencies kept "in touch with one another through a U.S. communications installation in the Panama Canal Zone which covers all of Latin America." This allowed them to "co-ordinate intelligence information among the southern cone countries." Just this month, Pinochet's security chief General Manuel Contreras, who is serving a 240-year prison term in Chile for a wide-range of human rights violations, gave a TV interview in which he confirmed that the CIA's then-Deputy Director, General Vernon Walters (who served under director George H.W. Bush), was fully informed of the "international activities" of Condor.



## GREG GRANDIN | THE UNHOLY TRINITY

**Torture:** Torture is the animating spirit of this triad, the unholyest of this unholy trinity. In Chile, Pinochet's henchmen killed or disappeared thousands – but they tortured tens of thousands. In Uruguay and Brazil, the state only disappeared a few hundred, but fear of torture and rape became a way of life, particularly for the politically engaged. Torture, even more than the disappearances, was meant not so much to get one person to talk as to get everybody else to shut up.

At this point, Washington can no longer deny that its agents in Latin America facilitated, condoned, and practiced torture. Defectors from death squads have described the instruction given by their U.S. tutors, and survivors have testified to the presence of Americans in their torture sessions. One Pentagon "torture manual" distributed in at least five Latin American countries described at length "coercive" procedures designed to "destroy [the] capacity to resist."

As Naomi Klein and Alfred McCoy have documented in their recent books, these field manuals were compiled using information gathered from CIA-commissioned mind control and electric-shock experiments conducted in the 1950s. Just as the "torture memos" of today's war on terror parse the difference between "pain" and "severe pain," "psychological harm" and "lasting psychological harm," these manuals went to great lengths to regulate the application of suffering. "The threat to inflict pain can trigger fears more damaging than the immediate sensation of pain," one handbook read.

"Before all else, you must be efficient," said U.S. police advisor Dan Mitrione, assassinated by Uruguay's revolutionary Tupamaros in 1970 for training security forces in the finer points of torture. "You must cause only the damage that is strictly necessary, not a bit more." Mitrione taught by demonstration, reportedly torturing to death a number of homeless people kidnapped off the streets of Montevideo. "We must control our tempers in any case," he said. "You have to act with the efficiency and cleanliness of a surgeon and with the perfection of an artist."

Florencio Caballero, having escaped from Honduras's notorious Battalion 316 into exile in Canada in 1986, testified that U.S. instructors urged him to inflict psychological, not "physical," pain "to study the fears and weakness of a prisoner." Force the victim to "stand up," the Americans taught Caballero, "don't let him sleep, keep him naked and in isolation, put rats and cockroaches in his cell, give him bad food, serve him dead animals, throw cold water on him, change the temperature." Sound familiar?

Yet, as Abu Ghraib demonstrated so clearly and the destroyed CIA interrogation videos would undoubtedly have made no less clear, maintaining a distinction between psychological and physical torture is not always possible. As one manual conceded, if a suspect does not respond, then the threat of direct pain "must be carried out." One of Caballero's victims, Inés Murillo, testified that her captors, including at least one CIA agent – his involvement

## **GREG GRANDIN | THE UNHOLY TRINITY**

was confirmed in Senate testimony by the CIA's deputy director – hung her from the ceiling naked, forced her to eat dead birds and rats raw, made her stand for hours without sleep and without being allowed to urinate, poured freezing water over her at regular intervals for extended periods, beat her bloody, and applied electric shocks to her body, including her genitals.

### **ANYTHING GOES**

Inés Murillo was definitely a member of Greene's torturable class. Yet Greene was writing in a more genteel time, when to torture the wrong person would be, as he put it, as cheeky as a "chauffeur" sleeping with a "peeress." Today, when it comes to torture, anything goes.

Ideologues in the war on terror, like Berkeley law professor John Yoo, have worked mightily to narrow the definition of what torture is, thereby expanding possibilities for its application. They have worked no less hard to increase the number of people throughout the world who could be subjected to torture – by defining anyone they cared to choose as a stateless "enemy combatant," and therefore not protected by national and international laws banning cruel and inhumane treatment. Even former Attorney General John Ashcroft has declared himself potentially torturable, telling a University of Colorado audience recently that he would be willing to submit to waterboarding "if it were necessary."

Things are so freewheeling that Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz – who, at his perch at Harvard would undoubtedly be outraged if he were to be tortured – thinks that the practice needs to be regulated, as if it were a routine medical act. He has suggested empowering judges to issue "warrants" that would allow interrogators to insert "sterile needles" underneath finger nails to "to cause excruciating pain without endangering life."

Pinochet, who didn't shy away from justifying his actions in the name of Western Civilization, would never have dreamed of defending torture as brazenly as has Dick Cheney, backed up by legal theorists like Yoo. At the same time, revisionist historians, like Max Boot, and pundits, like the Atlantic Monthly's Robert Kaplan, rewrite history, claiming that operations like the Phoenix Program in Vietnam or the death squads in El Salvador were effective, morally acceptable tactics and should be emulated in fighting today's "War on Terror."

But this kind of promiscuity has its risks. In Latin America, the word "disappeared" came to denote not just victimization but moral repudiation, as the mothers and children of the disappeared led a continental movement to restore the rule of law. They provide hope that one day the world-wide network of repression assembled by the Bush administration will be as discredited as Operation Condor is today in Latin America. As Greene wrote half a century ago, on the eve of the fall of another famous torturer, Cuba's Fulgencio Batista, "it is a real danger for everyone when what is shocking changes."



# READ MORE POLITICAL ESSAYS AT **COLDTYPE.NET**

Download political essays by the best  
and brightest commentators from  
around the world, plus books, booklets,  
essays, newspapers and magazines  
– all in pdf format – all free of charge, at  
<http://coldtype.net>

(Click on this link to enter web site)



**ColdType**

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD