

The Interrogators: Task Force 500 and America's Secret War Against Al Qa'eda

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Reviewed by Neil James

Despite its subtitle, *The Interrogators* is a much more specific account and purports to tell the story of the battle of minds and wills between captured Al Qa'eda and Taliban fighters and their American captors during the initial campaign in Afghanistan in late 2001 and 2002. Written pseudonymously with the help of a journalist, the author, an apparently strong-willed US Army Reserve sergeant, occupies centre stage,

The interrogation of prisoners provides one of the few means of direct face-to-face human interaction with the enemy. This personal intellectual battle means interrogation is much more reactive in both time and nature than all other forms of intelligence gathering. Moreover, the art and science of interrogation is one of the most misunderstood aspects of warfare (even by military personnel). Popular ignorance tends to engender lurid flights of fancy and often the erroneous belief that 'torture' is somehow involved or even mandatory. On the contrary, interrogation, at least by traditional US, British and Australian standards is predominantly an intellectual not a physical battle and no illegal or forcible coercion is involved.

Indeed one good lesson *The Interrogators* emphasises are the many problems caused because terrorist prisoners generally know that forcible methods will not be used against them. In one case cited, a terrorist is actually won over by his realisation that the very lack of torture exemplifies the enduring moral strength of his captor's cause and the immorality of terrorist methods and motivation.

To the professional intelligence officer or interrogator, however, the book prompts as many questions as it tries to provide answers. A key question is why the book was authorised for publication. Its coverage of general and specific intelligence gathering methods is obviously of considerable benefit to the enemy in what is a continuing and probably lengthy conflict.

Australian interrogation doctrine and practice has been greatly influenced by our campaigns in Asia since the mid 1950s. American practice has been shaped more by the Cold War in Europe. After 9/11 US military and intelligence agency interrogation capabilities were quite ill-suited to the needs of a sudden, relatively intensive and fairly large campaign against an irregular enemy in central Asia. Operational and logistic limitations, and the tempo of operations, meant there were simply not enough interrogators (even after calling up reservists). As in many previous wars, too many of them spoke the wrong foreign language meaning much interrogation had to use interpreters, which brings a range of practical effectiveness, time-on-task, operational security and psychological problems.

As a result prisoner handling and exploitation systems broke down. Interrogators and their interpreters were too often pushed to physical and intellectual exhaustion — and on a sustained basis. The sheer numbers of prisoners and

the limited facilities available worked against their systematic exploitation both collectively and individually. Group detention precluded the optimal isolation of medium and high value prisoners individually. Prisoners were able to comfort each other and bolster their individual and general resistance, including collusion with cover stories. These systematic defects prejudiced the operational security of the interrogation centre and the intelligence gathering campaign against Al Qa'eda generally.

The US Army interrogation approaches detailed (quite wrongly) in the book also appear rigid and somewhat one-dimensional. By design or circumstance they seem based on the skill levels of individual (and often inexperienced) interrogators rather than on systematically assessing the psychological and other vulnerabilities of individual prisoners and targeting them accordingly. The approaches described also do not appear to incorporate enough emphasis on the principles of both psychological assessment and psychological attack to break a prisoner's will to resist co-operation.

There appeared to be little central planning and control, and little attention to preparation of both the interrogator and the prisoner. This was compounded by insufficient specialist intelligence support within the interrogation centre itself, grossly inadequate feedback from intelligence customers, and an over-emphasis on the number of reports raised rather than the quality and timeliness of the intelligence extracted. Little attention seemed to be given to the psychological wellbeing of the interrogators, and the farcical troop rotation policy employed simply defies belief.

Most worryingly, there seemed to be intrinsic weaknesses in the command and control of the interrogation centre. I kept looking for the dedicated on-the-scene command needed by experienced interrogation-trained officers of appropriate rank (at least major upwards), and the proper integration of detention and exploitation operations. Instead the centre appeared to be largely run by NCOs and operated with the fundamental flaw of not placing the guard force under command (so one commander is fully accountable).

The conflict with trans-national Islamist terrorism is as much an intellectual and spiritual struggle as it is a physical one. In the epilogue, the author recounts a conversation where a staff officer aptly remarked that in the type of counter-terrorist campaign they were waging the interrogators were 'the new infantry' and that they were fighting on 'a new front'. Interrogation remains a vital operational capability and an important professional skill. This book provides much food for thought on how it should be undertaken, supported and commanded. ♦

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