The Criminal ‘Laws’ of Counterinsurgency

A new book traces how the CIA and U.S. counterinsurgency warfare operatives adopted lessons from the Nazis’ fight against the partisans and evolved into a dangerous law onto themselves, writes retired JAG Major Todd E. Pierce.

By Todd E. Pierce

Douglas Valentine has once again added to the store of knowledge necessary for American citizens to understand how the U.S. government actually works today, in his most recent book entitled The CIA As Organized Crime. (Valentine previously wrote The Phoenix Program, which should be read with the current book.)

The U.S. “deep state” – of which the CIA is an integral part – is an open secret now and the Phoenix Program (assassinations, death squads, torture, mass detentions, exploitation of information) has been its means of controlling populations. Consequently, knowing the deep state’s methods is the only hope of building a democratic opposition to the deep state and to restore as much as possible the Constitutional system we had in previous centuries, as imperfect as it was.

Princeton University political theorist Sheldon Wolin described the U.S. political system in place by 2003 as “inverted totalitarianism.” He reaffirmed that in 2009 after seeing a year of the Obama administration. Correctly identifying the threat against constitutional governance is the first step to restore it, and as Wolin understood, substantive constitutional government ended long before Donald Trump campaigned. He’s just taking unconstitutional governance to the next level in following the same path as his recent predecessors. However, even as some elements of the “deep state” seek to remove Trump, the President now has many “deep state” instruments in his own hands to be used at his unreviewable discretion.

Many “never-Trumpers” of both parties see the deep state’s national security bureaucracy as their best hope to destroy Trump and thus defend constitutional government, but those hopes are misguided. After all, the deep state’s bureaucratic leadership has worked arduously for decades to subvert constitutional order.

As Michael Glennon, author of National Security and Double Government, pointed out in a June 2017 Harper’s essay, if “the president maintains his attack, splintered and demoralized factions within the bureaucracy could actually support — not oppose — many potential Trump initiatives, such as stepped-up drone strikes, cyberattacks, covert action, immigration bans, and mass
Glennon noted that the propensity of “security managers” to back policies which ratchet up levels of security “will play into Trump’s hands, so that if and when he finally does declare victory, a revamped security directorate could emerge more menacing than ever, with him its devoted new ally.” Before that happens, it is incumbent for Americans to understand what Valentine explains in his book of CIA methods of “population control” as first fully developed in the Vietnam War’s Phoenix Program.

Hating the U.S.

There also must be the realization that our “national security” apparatchiks – principally but not solely the CIA – have served to exponentially increase the numbers of those people who hate the U.S. Some of these people turn to terrorism as an expression of that hostility. Anyone who is at all familiar with the CIA and Al Qaeda knows that the CIA has been Al Qaeda’s most important “combat multiplier” since 9/11, and the CIA can be said to have birthed ISIS as well with the mistreatment of incarcerated Iraqi men in U.S. prisons in Iraq.

Indeed, by following the model of the Phoenix Program, the CIA must be seen in the Twenty-first Century as a combination of the ultimate “Murder, Inc.” when judged by the CIA’s methods such as drone warfare and its victims; and the Keystone Kops, when the multiple failures of CIA policies are considered. This is not to make light of what the CIA does, but the CIA’s misguided policies and practices have served to generate wrath, hatred and violence against Americans, which we see manifested in cities such as San Bernardino, Orlando, New York and Boston.

Pointing out the harm to Americans is not to dismiss the havoc that Americans under the influence of the CIA have perpetrated on foreign populations. But “morality” seems a lost virtue today in the U.S., which is under the influence of so much militaristic war propaganda that morality no longer enters into the equation in determining foreign policy.

In addition to the harm the CIA has caused to people around the world, the CIA works tirelessly at subverting its own government at home, as was most visible in the spying on and subversion of the torture investigation by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. The subversion of democracy also includes the role the CIA plays in developing and disseminating war propaganda as “information warfare,” upon the American people. This is what the Rand Corporation under the editorship of Zalmay Khalilzad has described as “conditioning the battlefield,” which begins with the minds of the American population.
Douglas Valentine discusses and documents the role of the CIA in disseminating pro-war propaganda and disinformation as complementary to the violent tactics of the Phoenix Program in Vietnam. Valentine explains that “before Phoenix was adopted as the model for policing the American empire, many US military commanders in Vietnam resisted the Phoenix strategy of targeting civilians with Einsatzgruppen-style ‘special forces’ and Gestapo-style secret police.”

Military Commanders considered that type of program a flagrant violation of the Law of War. “Their main job is to zap the in-betweener — you know, the people who aren’t all the way with the government and aren’t all the way with the Viet Cong either. They figure if you zap enough in-betweener, people will begin to get the idea,” according to one quote from The Phoenix Program referring to the unit tasked with much of the Phoenix operations.

Nazi Influences

Comparing the Phoenix Program and its operatives to “Einsatzgruppen-style ‘special forces’ and Gestapo-style secret police” is not a distortion of the strategic understanding of each. Both programs were extreme forms of repression operating under martial law principles where the slightest form of dissent was deemed to represent the work of the “enemy.” Hitler’s Bandit Hunters: The SS and the Nazi Occupation of Europe by Philip W. Blood describes German “Security Warfare” as practiced in World War II, which can be seen as identical in form to the Phoenix Program as to how the enemy is defined as anyone who is “potentially” a threat, deemed either “partizans” or terrorists.

That the Germans included entire racial categories in that does not change the underlying logic, which was, anyone deemed an internal enemy in a territory in which their military operated had to be “neutralized” by any means necessary. The U.S. military and the South Vietnamese military governments operated under the same principles but not based on race, rather the perception that certain areas and villages were loyal to the Viet Cong.

This repressive doctrine was also not unique to the Nazis in Europe and the U.S. military in Vietnam. Similar though less sophisticated strategies were used against the American Indians and by the imperial powers of the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries, including by the U.S. in its newly acquired territories of the Philippines and in the Caribbean. This “imperial policing,” i.e., counter-insurgency, simply moved to more manipulative and, in ways, more violent levels.

That the U.S. drew upon German counter-insurgency doctrine, as brutal as it was, is well documented. This is shown explicitly in a 2011 article published in the Journal of Military and Strategic Studies entitled German Counterinsurgency
Revisited by Charles D. Melson. He wrote that in 1942, Nazi commander Heinrich Himmler named a deputy for “anti-bandit warfare,” (Bevollmachtigter fur die Bandenkampfung im Osten), SS-General von dem Bach, whose responsibilities expanded in 1943 to head all SS and police anti-bandit units and operations. He was one of the architects of the Einsatzguppen “concept of anti-partisan warfare,” a German predecessor to the “Phoenix Program.”

‘Anti-Partisan’ Lessons

It wasn’t a coincidence that this “anti-partisan” warfare concept should be adopted by U.S. forces in Vietnam and retained to the present day. Melson pointed out that a “post-war German special forces officer described hunter or ranger units as ‘men who knew every possible ruse and tactic of guerrilla warfare. They had gone through the hell of combat against the crafty partisans in the endless swamps and forests of Russia.’”

Consequently, “The German special forces and reconnaissance school was a sought after posting for North Atlantic Treaty Organization special operations personnel,” who presumably included members of the newly created U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers, which was in part headquartered at Bad Tolz in Germany, as well as CIA paramilitary officers.

Just as with the later Phoenix Program to the present-day U.S. global counterinsurgency, Melson wrote that the “attitude of the [local] population and the amount of assistance it was willing to give guerilla units was of great concern to the Germans. Different treatment was supposed to be accorded to affected populations, bandit supporters, and bandits, while so-called population and resource control measures for each were noted (but were in practice, treated apparently one and the same). ‘Action against enemy agitation’ was the psychological or information operations of the Nazi period. The Nazis believed that, ‘Because of the close relationship of guerilla warfare and politics, actions against enemy agitation are a task that is just as important as interdiction and combat actions. All means must be used to ward off enemy influence and waken and maintain a clear political will.’”

This is typical of any totalitarian system – a movement or a government – whether the process is characterized as counterinsurgency or internal security. The idea of any civilian collaboration with the “enemy” is the basis for what the U.S. government charges as “conspiracy” in the Guantanamo Military Commissions.

Valentine explains the Phoenix program as having been developed by the CIA in 1967 to combine “existing counterinsurgency programs in a concerted effort to ‘neutralize’ the Vietcong infrastructure (VCI).” He explained further that
“neutralize” meant “to kill, capture, or make to defect.” “Infrastructure” meant civilians suspected of supporting North Vietnamese and Vietcong soldiers. Central to the Phoenix program was that its targets were civilians, making the operation a violation of the Geneva Conventions which guaranteed protection to civilians in time of war.

“The Vietnam’s War’s Silver Lining: A Bureaucratic Model for Population Control Emerges” is the title of Chapter 3. Valentine writes that the “CIA’s Phoenix program changed how America fights its wars and how the public views this new type of political and psychological warfare, in which civilian casualties are an explicit objective.” The intent of the Phoenix program evolved from “neutralizing” enemy leaders into “a program of systematic repression for the political control of the South Vietnamese people. It sought to accomplish this through a highly bureaucratized system of disposing of people who could not be ideologically assimilated.” The CIA claimed a legal basis for the program in “emergency decrees” and orders for “administrative detention.”

Lauding Petraeus

Valentine refers to a paper by David Kilcullen entitled Countering Global Insurgency. Kilcullen is one of the so-called “counter-insurgency experts” whom General David Petraeus gathered together in a cell to promote and refine “counter-insurgency,” or COIN, for the modern era. Fred Kaplan, who is considered a “liberal author and journalist” at Slate, wrote a panegyric to these cultists entitled, The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War. The purpose of this cell was to change the practices of the U.S. military into that of “imperial policing,” or COIN, as they preferred to call it.

But Kilcullen argued in his paper that “The ‘War on Terrorism” is actually a campaign to counter a global insurgency. Therefore, Kilcullen argued, “we need a new paradigm, capable of addressing globalised insurgency.” His “disaggregation strategy” called for “actions to target the insurgent infrastructure that would resemble the unfairly maligned (but highly effective) Vietnam-era Phoenix program.”

He went on, “Contrary to popular mythology, this was largely a civilian aid and development program, supported by targeted military pacification operations and intelligence activity to disrupt the Viet Cong Infrastructure. A global Phoenix program (including the other key elements that formed part of the successful Vietnam CORDS system) would provide a useful start point to consider how Disaggregation would develop in practice.”

It is readily apparent that, in fact, a Phoenix-type program is now U.S. global
policy and — just like in Vietnam — it is applying “death squad” strategies that eliminate not only active combatants but also civilians who simply find themselves in the same vicinity, thus creating antagonisms that expand the number of fighters.

Corraborative evidence of Valentine’s thesis is, perhaps surprisingly, provided by the CIA’s own website where a number of redacted historical documents have been published. Presumably, they are documents first revealed under the Freedom of Information Act. A few however are copies of news articles once available to the public but now archived by the CIA which has blacked-out portions of the articles.

The Bloody Reality

One “sanitized” article — approved for release in 2011 — is a partially redacted New Times article of Aug. 22, 1975, by Michael Drosnin. The article recounts a story of a U.S. Army counter-intelligence officer “who directed a small part of a secret war aimed not at the enemy’s soldiers but at its civilian leaders.” He describes how a CIA-directed Phoenix operative dumped a bag of “eleven bloody ears” as proof of six people killed.

The officer, who recalled this incident in 1971, said, “It made me sick. … I couldn’t go on with what I was doing in Vietnam. . . . It was an assassination campaign . . . my job was to identify and eliminate VCI, the Viet Cong ‘infrastructure’ — the communist’s shadow government. I worked directly with two Vietnamese units, very tough guys who didn’t wear uniforms . . . In the beginning they brought back about 10 percent alive. By the end they had stopped taking prisoners. …

“How many VC they got I don’t know. I saw a hell of a lot of dead bodies. We’d put a tag on saying VCI, but no one really knew — it was just some native in black pajamas with 16 bullet holes.”

This led to an investigation by New Times in a day when there were still “investigative reporters,” and not the government sycophants of today. Based on first-hand accounts, their investigation concluded that Operation Phoenix was the “only systematized kidnapping, torture and assassination program ever sponsored by the United States government. . . . Its victims were noncombatants.” At least 40,000 were murdered, with “only” about 8,000 supposed Viet Cong political cadres targeted for execution, with the rest civilians (including women and children) killed and “later conveniently labeled VCI. Hundreds of thousands were jailed without trial, often after sadistic abuse.” The article notes that Phoenix was conceived, financed, and directed by the Central Intelligence Agency, as Mr. Valentine writes.
A second article archived by the CIA was by the Christian Science Monitor, dated Jan. 5, 1971, describing how the Saigon government was “taking steps ... that could help eliminate one of the most glaring abuses of its controversial Phoenix program, which is aimed against the Viet Cong political and administrative apparatus.” Note how the Monitor shifted blame away from the CIA and onto the South Vietnamese government.

But the article noted that one of the most persistent criticisms of Phoenix was that it resulted “in the arrest and imprisonment of many innocent civilians.” These were called “Class C Communist offenders,” some of whom may actually have been forced to commit such “belligerent acts” as digging trenches or carrying rice. It was those alleged as the “hard core, full-time cadre” who were deemed to make up the “shadow government” designated as Class A and B Viet Cong.

Yet “security committees” throughout South Vietnam, under the direction of the CIA, sentenced at least 10,000 “Class C civilians” to prison each year, far more than Class A and B combined. The article stated, “Thousands of these prisoners are never brought to court trial, and thousands of other have never been sentenced.” The latter statement would mean they were just held in “indefinite detention,” like the prisoners held at Guantanamo and other U.S. detention centers with high levels of CIA involvement.

Not surprisingly to someone not affiliated with the CIA, the article found as well that “Individual case histories indicate that many who have gone to prison as active supporters of neither the government nor the Viet Cong come out as active backers of the Viet Cong and with an implacable hatred of the government.” In other words, the CIA and the COIN enthusiasts are achieving the same results today with the prisons they set up in Iraq and Afghanistan.

CIA Crimes

Valentine broadly covers the illegalities of the CIA over the years, including its well-documented role in facilitating the drug trade over the years. But, in this reviewer’s opinion, his most valuable contribution is his description of the CIA’s participation going back at least to the Vietnam War in the treatment of what the U.S. government today calls “unlawful combatants.”

“Unlawful combatants” is a descriptive term made up by the Bush administration to remove people whom U.S. officials alleged were “terrorists” from the legal protections of the Geneva Conventions and Human Rights Law and thus to justify their capture or killing in the so-called “Global War on Terror.” Since the U.S. government deems them “unlawful” – because they do not belong to an organized military structure and do not wear insignia – they are denied the “privilege” of belligerency that applies to traditional soldiers. But – unless they take a
“direct part in hostilities” – they would still maintain their civilian status under the law of war and thus not lose the legal protection due to civilians even if they exhibit sympathy or support to one side in a conflict.

Ironically, by the Bush administration’s broad definition of “unlawful combatants,” CIA officers and their support structure also would fit the category. But the American public is generally forgiving of its own war criminals though most self-righteous and hypocritical in judging foreign war criminals. But perhaps given sufficient evidence, the American public could begin to see both the immorality of this behavior and its counterproductive consequences.

This is not to condemn all CIA officers, some of whom acted in good faith that they were actually defending the United States by acquiring information on a professed enemy in the tradition of Nathan Hale. But it is to harshly condemn those CIA officials and officers who betrayed the United States by subverting its Constitution, including waging secret wars against foreign countries without a declaration of war by Congress. And it decidedly condemns the CIA war criminals who acted as a law unto themselves in the torture and murder of foreign nationals, as Valentine’s book describes.

Talleyrand is credited with saying, “They have learned nothing and forgotten nothing.” Reportedly, that was borrowed from a 1796 letter by a French naval officer, which stated, in the original language: Personne n’est corrigé; personne n’a su ni rien oublier ni rien apprendre. In English: “Nobody has been corrected; no one has known to forget, nor yet to learn anything.” That sums up the CIA leadership entirely.

Douglas Valentine’s book is a thorough documentation of that fact and it is essential reading for all Americans if we are to have any hope for salvaging a remnant of representative government.

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Potential Chaos in the Kingdom

President Trump has made the “alliance” with troublemaking Saudi Arabia a centerpiece of his chaotic foreign policy, but the latest jockeying for power in Riyadh may portend unexpected trouble, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.
A foreign country may be a problematic partner for the United States for two basic types of reasons, both of which apply to Saudi Arabia. First, the partner’s foreign policies may range from misguided to immoral, or risk sucking the United States into conflicts in which it is not, or should not be, a party.

Saudi Arabia’s calamitous war in Yemen is currently the leading example of this sort of problem. More recently has come the economic and diplomatic offensive against Qatar, which threw a wrench into the Trump administration’s aspirations regarding regional security, and in response to which the State Department this week delivered a bemused scolding.

Second, internal fragility may risk having the foreign regime suddenly come apart. This not only would mean that the partnership with the United States also would come apart. It also could mean that close association of the United States with the old regime earns it lasting animosity from the new rulers and from the discontented foreign populace that supported political change.

For an example of this dynamic, one need look only to the other side of the Persian Gulf. The close association of the United States with the Shah of Iran became a major ingredient in post-revolutionary anti-Americanism in Iran. Even after the Shah had been deposed, his admission to the United States for medical treatment was the immediate trigger for seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and a hostage crisis that lasted more than a year.

The association of the United States with the Saudi regime, which has endured so long and has become so taken for granted that it routinely gets referred to as an “alliance,” makes it easy to overlook what an anachronism that regime is and how fragile is such a medieval configuration within the context of the Twenty-first Century. An extended royal family, whose name is part of the country’s name (imagine if the United Kingdom were instead called “Windsor Britannia”), benefits from enormous but publicly uncounted rake-offs from the country’s oil wealth. That wealth has for many years been critical to buying subservience and complacency from the general population, although now and then indications emerge – such as the Saudi origins of most of the 9/11 hijackers – that not all is well beneath the surface complacency.

Besides relying on what the oil money can buy, the regime also has relied heavily on religious sanction to sustain its legitimacy. As part of that reliance, the deals struck with the ulema or clergy have sustained some of the anachronistic features of the country, such as women not being allowed to drive.

The Succession Risk
The large size of the royal family means not only large rake-offs but also substantial potential for divisions within the family. One of the biggest, and surely one of touchiest, issues, has been leadership succession. The founder of the Saudi kingdom, Abdulaziz Ibn Saud, bequeathed an odd succession plan with the throne first passing to one of his oldest sons but then going, brother to brother (or half-brother) through other sons of Abdulaziz.

Because he had more than three dozen sons, this arrangement could persist for a long time. But everyone knew that eventually the kingdom would run out of sons of even the unusually fecund Abdulaziz, and the throne would have to pass to the next generation. The sons and grandsons of Abdulaziz surely have had different preferences and views as to who in that next generation should get the top job. Latent instability can become overt conflict if discontented members of the ruling clan look for ways to exploit discontent in the wider population.

The aged King Salman, with visibly declining faculties, has made a singularly audacious move that, combined with some of his earlier moves over the past couple of years, sets up his favorite son, Muhammad bin Salman (MbS) to succeed him on the throne.

This is the second time Salman has sidelined a crown prince to move MbS up in the line of succession. The first victim was Salman’s half-brother Muqrin. The second was his nephew Muhammad bin Nayef (MbN), who also lost his job as interior minister.

With much of what Salman had done earlier in his career – most of which was spent as governor of Riyadh, with a further informal role as a sort of family disciplinarian – he could benefit from the strength that came from being one of the Sudairi Seven, an alliance of full brothers that also included King Fahd, defense minister Sultan, and MbN’s father and predecessor as interior minister, Nayef, all three now deceased. But this latest move was Salman acting on his own; MbN is also part of the Sudairi wing of the family.

**Showing Unity**

The regime has made a show of unity, announcing that 31 of 34 members of the Allegiance Council, a family organ that is supposed to deliberate on succession matters, approved of the latest change. An image was released of MbS kissing the hand of MbN, who reportedly pledged loyalty to the new crown prince. Family members continue to share an interest in not making any moves that could jeopardize their enormous privilege and personal wealth.

But surely there must be many royal family minds asking: with all the sons and all the grandsons of Abdulaziz to choose from, why should Salman be the one who
gets to take it on himself to make his favorite son the designated successor?

It is not as if the 31-year-old MbS had a record that, before his father started catapulting him, made him stand out from the royal crowd. The most distinctive and consequential initiative associated with MbS since he began gaining extraordinary power — the war in Yemen — has been a disaster. The bellicosity and aggressiveness that MbS has displayed toward Iran, and now Qatar, have the makings of additional costly regional misadventures.

MbS talks a good game regarding internal reform with his “Vision 2030” program, but it remains to be seen whether he has better ideas than his elders and predecessors for how to reconcile modernity with the non-modern demands of the religious establishment on which the House of Saud’s legitimacy rests. It also remains to be seen whether he will offer effective ways of weaning a sinecure-ridden society off oil and of handling the discontent that accompanies such dislocation. MbS’s father may have set him up for — when the father is no longer around — failures great enough to rend even the fabric of the royal family’s shared interests.

The downside for the United States is not just in losing a respected and experienced security manager and counterpart in the person of MbN. And it is not only in the prospect, serious though this is, of being involved in more Yemen-like destructive mistakes. It is in how Salman’s power play on behalf of his nuclear family has done nothing to reduce, and may even have increased, the risk that we will awake one day to discover that Saudi Arabia is not the stable partner in the Persian Gulf region that we thought it was. We thought that about the Shah’s Iran, too.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency’s top analysts. He is author most recently of Why America Misunderstands the World. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest’s Web site. Reprinted with author’s permission.)

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Institutional Factors in US Violence

The pervasive violence in American society is driven by many factors, including easy access to firearms and Hollywood’s glorification of killing, but there are also institutional factors, as Lawrence Davidson explains.

By Lawrence Davidson
There is a lot of violence in the United States, and if you look at the news it appears that things are getting worse. The nation is armed to the teeth, which means that any out-of-control angry person can vent in lethal fashion. Or, maybe they can choose to vent in the European style by using their car as a battering ram.

There is much head shaking about this nationwide violence and much wondering about its sources. The usual explanation assigns blame to the “bad apples.” That is, all these people acting out violently are somehow unstable. The fault lies with the individual, and this can be seen in their inability to contain their rage. If there is a broader influence it has to be some foreign agency (this used to be Communism but now is said to be Islam) urging them on through a subtle process of radicalization. This is thought to be one way good apples go bad.

But why limit blame to unstable personalities or shadowy alien forces? Our homebred culture acts as the context for a citizen’s behavior, suggesting to them what is allowable and what is not. In the U.S., with its almost nonexistent gun laws, its fundamentalist religious ideas, its rampant Islamophobia, its prevailing white-backlash politics, and its media entertainment industry heavily reliant on virtual violence, there is apparently some confusion as to what is and isn’t permissible.

Under these circumstances it is quite possible that at least some manifestations of our own culture have the potential of serving as contaminating agents for otherwise upright citizens. Contamination here means turning those citizens into violent agents – little ticking time bombs.

Cultural Corruption

What aspects of U.S. culture could serve this corrupting function? Well there are those mentioned above plus the superheated patriotic environments of thousands of VFW lodges, defensive attitudes and behavior of police fraternal leagues, the motorcycle clubs where flying three-foot-long American flags from your fender is de rigeur, and last but not least the environment of your typical Trump rally.

However, these cultural centers of resentment and anger are only occasional producers of public violence. There are other very common culturally contaminating sources that actually supply consistent venues for bringing out the worst in many of us.

These are institutions that are hardly noticed by the public and yet are turning thousands of American citizens (mostly young men) into battered, harassed, and
humiliated individuals, some of whom will then turn into batterers, harassers and humiliators themselves. Some of them will make this corrupting experience the basis for lifelong friendships. Some will see these activities as integral to their “glory days.”

Here are two examples, and ironically, both are part of institutions that purport to be a source of the nation’s highest values – educational institutions and military institutions

**The Campus-Based Fraternity**

In the region of the United States where I live, one of the largest universities is called Penn State. “Penn” stands for Pennsylvania, and it is among this state’s oldest and most respected institutions. Like many other universities and colleges, though, Penn State is a home to a large number of fraternities. Fraternities are largely self-governing male clubs or associations that are supposed to provide camaraderie for their members. Originally, they were seen as organizations that “ennobled” their members and aided in their education.

Today, most fraternities are boys clubs that all too often operate as if the fraternal group is bound only by its own traditions rather than societal norms. Among those traditions are regularly drinking oneself into a stupor and emotionally and sometimes physically “hazing” those “pledging” the fraternity.

Pledging means going through the process prescribed for membership. At the core of this process is the systematic demeaning or embarrassing of the pledges for set period of time. The rationale behind this behavior is that “hazing” transforms the “pledge class” into a unified “band of brothers.” Overall the process weakens individuality and independent judgment.

Most members of fraternities range from 17 to 21 years of age. At this point I would remind the reader that the frontal cortex, that part of the brain that provides “executive function” or control for behavior, does not fully mature until one’s mid-twenties.

What are you likely to get when you put together an immature constituency and the sort of organizational traditions described above? Well, on Feb. 4 at the Penn State fraternity Beta Theta Pi, you got the wrongful death of a 19-year-old pledge.

Many men whose own youth have been tied to fraternities dismiss such an event as too rare to be significant. But is that so? Between the year 2000 and December 2014 there were 57 deaths due to hazing at U.S. colleges. This activity is prevalent enough, and dangerous enough, that presently 44 states have enacted some form of anti-hazing statutes.
Under the circumstances, Jason Brennan, professor of ethics and public policy at Georgetown University, is right when he observes that “as a matter of fact fraternities don’t educate and ennoble; they stultify and corrupt.” How so? They allow you to see cruelty as an important and functional part of a “normal” social process. They allow you the opportunity to decide if you like being cruel or not.

**The Military’s “Basic Training”**

In what other major organization do you find hazing? The answer is in the U.S. military. It is used during basic training. According to a study appearing in the American Medical Association’s Journal of Ethics appearing March 2014, “there is a long history of sanctioned abuse of new recruits by their drill instructors during entry training.” Such behavior is particularly characteristic of the Army and the Marines. Officially, the military now regards this form of hazing as “cruel and unnecessary” and “inconsistent with its core institutional values.” However, this is probably more recruiting propaganda rather than a statement of real change.

According to the military-associated website *Task and Purpose*, recruits are still subject to periodic “shark attacks,” which means being “harassed and harangued” and having instilled in them “the fear factor.” These are still the means by which “the whole discipline process” is created.

Traditionally, the military sees hazing as serving three purposes: (1) it weeds out those “unfit or unwilling to serve”; (2) it allegedly destroys the civilian “principles and norms” of the new recruits so that they can be replaced by those of the military organization; and (3) it allegedly builds “cohesion” among the recruits. Numbers 1 and 3 also apply to the hazing process of fraternities.

**Hazing and Cultural Deterioration**

The rationale behind hazing is to destroy pre-existing “values and habits” through a process of abuse so that they can be replaced by new “values and habits.” For fraternities the new value structure is relatively benign, going little beyond a sense of “brotherhood” and “old boy” camaraderie that is supposed to last well beyond one’s college years. It is an elitist message but not one that risks widespread cultural deterioration.

For the military the goal is not benign at all. It is no less than the destruction of the recruit’s individuality and habit of independent thinking. The desired restructured individual is one that takes orders unquestioningly and functions as part of a cadre rather than an individual. This is an undeniably anti-democratic process, the effectiveness of which contributes to the
difficulty of many veterans to reintegrate back into civilian life. At the same
time, “boot camp” seeks to raise the violence potential of the recruit.

We cannot overemphasize the fact that in both cases the institutionalized
methodology for the development of an alleged new outlook among millions of
citizens is harassment and abuse. No society that allows such processes to go on
in some of its most important culture-shaping institutions can hope to remain
mentally healthy.

In today’s America, there seems to be a deep-seated restlessness. With a nearly
open access to all manner of weapons and a history of racial discrimination,
labor exploitation, and external aggression, what passes for cultural normality
is continuously punctuated by episodes of violence. When considering this, one
must face up to the fact that it is to violence that millions of citizens are
being acculturated in both college fraternities and military training. These
experiences must be judged as contributing factors to a process of cultural
deterioration.

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