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Interrogation Policy and the Global War on Terror

A Conversation with Glenn Carle, former CIA interrogator and
author of *The Interrogator: An Education* (2011)

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OWENS: One of the things that struck me while reading your book was your view that interrogating a suspect was in most ways similar to cultivating an intelligent asset. But of course there are a few crucial differences. Could say a bit more about the two endeavors?

CARLE: I think they are exactly the same: Both are about human relationships. I'm an operations officer; my job is to spot, access, develop, recruit and handle people who commit treason for the United States. When I was given the assignment [to interrogate a "high value" al-Qaeda suspect] I had never interrogated anybody. I was briefed on what came to be called the Enhanced Interrogation Techniques, but early on in the program no such thing existed. It was a much more amorphous—figure it out as you go, and be creative and aggressive. But I knew from the first second, as I wrote in the book, that I just would not have anything to do with any physical coercion. It was just wrong, I just flat wouldn't do it.

The psychological measures, however—that I had been trained in, I was more ambivalent about. Since CIA case officers are at risk of being kidnapped and tortured, our training included interrogation: you are put in a horrible situation to protect information if you can, and to keep your sanity, when you've lost all control about anything about your circumstances. There are some steps one can take to maintain a sense of self and some integrity. It was very useful training.

Having gone through that interrogation training, it was clear that the methods we were applying [to al Qaeda suspects] were based on the same principals and approach to which I had been subject. The goal is to "psychologically dislocate" the detainee. Things that we don't think about consciously define our sense of self and how we perceive ourselves in relation to the world and actions around us.

Gravity pulls us down. The ground is always below, the sky is up. The sun rises in the east, once a day. You eat several times during the day, or you really need to. You have to drink something and you will sleep for a certain period every 24 hours. Well, not necessarily. If someone takes away these reference points, you become completely disoriented, shockingly fast, and you go half-crazy.

The theory, as briefed to us, was that this psychological dislocation makes a subject more malleable and willing to provide information, and that the effect is not lasting. If they say the definition of torture is “any pain, physical or physiological, that is severe and lasting,” then [psychological dislocation] is therefore not torture because they say its effects are not lasting. I always thought that “lasting” is a very elastic concept, but I had been interrogated with these methods during my training and within two hours after being released I was fine, despite having been half-crazy shortly before. So, I thought, maybe [Enhanced Interrogation Tactics] isn’t torture.

But when I started to be involved in the actual interrogation of the detainee, I quickly repudiated that position and opposed all of the enhanced measures. What I found, both in discussions with colleagues who had interrogated people and in thinking about (and later doing) this myself, is that everything an interrogator should do is fundamentally the same as that of a case officer. Or what a boy should do when trying to seduce a girl: it is to establish a rapport, to understand the person sitting across from you. What are that person’s hopes and fears, quirks, motivations, sense of humor, intellectual limits, biases, vulnerabilities? All these things that make a person an individual. You get to know them, and you talk. Based on that you can obtain information. That’s it. There is no other way.

OWENS: Of course as you write in the book, and others have argued, this sounds awfully “soft” to a lot of people who think that being aggressive in other ways is the appropriate way to glean information.

CARLE: Fear and manipulation are legitimate tools in an interrogation. All human relations are based on manipulation. You can do it as an honest person—someone with integrity—or with the clear end of manipulating for national security purposes, or to extract information from a detainee. I think it’s not just useful but probably necessary to manipulate and play upon all the emotions a person will have.

But the argument that it’s too soft is just, I think, simplistic, and the view of someone who reflexively equate toughness and intimidation with efficiency and strength. And they are not the same thing at all. You want to be smart; you don’t want to be a brute.

OWENS: You mentioned that your duty as an intelligence officer was to help others commit treason against their countries, to the service our own national interest. At what point does your duty to humanity at large intrude upon, or even trump, your duty to our country?

CARLE: My book is an exploration on almost every sentence of exactly this dilemma. It's an acute and awful dilemma when you take an oath and work with the strong conviction that your government embodies in its laws and practices the values that protect individuals in this society—and then find out, as I did, that your conviction was wrong.

Now, turning the tables, that sense of awful tension is precisely what an intelligence officer looks for in his targets, in the people that we try to induce to commit treason. I spent twenty-three years saying to the person sitting across from me, "You have a chance to do right. Very few people ever have a chance to make a difference. But because you are a man of integrity, the contradiction is clear between your formal obligations to your country and what you know is your higher and deeper duty. I can help you be an honest man by committing treason."

Incredibly for Americans in my position, the tables were frankly turned because what we were ordered to do subverted the principals that we believed we were defending. It's a terrible dilemma.

OWENS: In your book's dedication page I was struck by the way you thank your parents for teaching you that "right and wrong are independent of authority or convention." The book is rife with examples of how you faced those authorities and conventions and tried to find your way across to right and wrong. But without the guidance of authority and convention, where then do you find your sense of right and wrong?

CARLE: I'm not sure there's an answer to the question. It's one of the ultimate questions of life, which is of course why you are studying it. This book describes an incredibly acute, months-long dilemma that distilled this exact issue for me, in a practical way. Is there a natural law? Is there a higher law? Is there a religious law? I personally think not; I'm more of a naturalist. But there is a clear sense of morality that evolves from human nature. We attribute it to higher laws, to one religion or another, but the results are more or less the same. That underpins most of our formal laws, but is, I think, separate from them sometimes. In the dilemma I faced, they did diverge.

My parents died just before the publication of my book. My father did many fine things in his life, but I think probably secretly his proudest achievement was to have been voted the 1943 Boston University Class Iconoclast. It was for him a moral and intellectual duty to challenge everything: never accept anything, because then you are not thinking. You are not an individual if you do not access, to the best of your ability, the facts, and then reach a conclusion independently. And that obtains for your instructions and your morals. So perhaps that's why people in my professional life have found me consistently friendly but insubordinate.

OWENS: Aristotle argued that we need to find what he calls a good man—what we might call a mentor—to model the proper way of life, to help live practically in a world of ideas and actions. I wonder if there was someone or some group of people who served that function for you, who helped you find your balance? Or did you feel untethered at this time of crisis?

CARLE: Not untethered, but in certainly crisis because of the divergence between orders, convictions, structures, and my sense of right. While it's conventional to dedicate a book to one's parents, they really are the towering shapers of my moral sense. Growing up around my parents' dinner table there were three things that counted in every discussion. The first was to have an inquiring mind; that's the ultimate value. The second was always to be the best—and if you weren't, strive to become the best, which of course is an impossible standard. And then the third was to value education, which is the supporting approach to the first two, I'd say. My father was more formally academic in his approach, and my mother was more intuitive, but they reached the same conclusions. For my father, Albert Camus was probably the most important moralist of the era, along with John Dewey.

OWENS: One last issue that I think the readers of this interview will be interested in is that of the censorship of the book itself. The book is rife, as readers will find, with redaction marks across many pages. I've heard recently in the news of other books —those of Ali Soufan and others—who faced strident censorship from the national security panel charged with vetting these sorts of books. Could you say a bit about the process and your feelings about it?

CARLE: Ali is an FBI officer, so I think the law is actually different for him, but since he was involved in CIA operations he may well come under the same legal umbrella that I did. The Supreme Court has ruled that CIA officers do not have the First Amendment rights that all other Americans do. We're the only exception to that. For the rest of our days, anything we write concerning national security or foreign policy must be submitted to the censors for approval. Their legal mandate is to protect sources and methods, and it's a legitimate mandate. One shouldn't be allowed to reveal that the foreign minister of country X spies for the United States. You'll get that man killed, and undermine American interests. That rule is fine.

However, "sources and methods" is a similarly elastic phrase as "severe and lasting." It has been interpreted in different ways by different presidential administrations. When George Tenet resigned and was replaced by Porter Goss, President Bush issued a couple of clear orders: you will clean up this den of opponents; you will not allow anything to be published about it. The administration viewed the intelligence community, and in particular the CIA, as hostile to the administration by definition. We were Euro fag cosmopolitans, left

wing pinkos who didn't understand the true interests of America—all of which is malarkey. But the message was clear. That was one motivation for the censorship.

I was told specifically about my book, in an off-the-cuff remark, that the censors would not allow me to make my detainee into a human being, or to take the reader into the interrogation room. They also had the clear objective of suppressing the book entirely, but I wouldn't give up on it. For two years I went back and forth with them.

And so the censors' combination of trying to make a ghost detainee a true ghost, and keep the reader from the interrogation room and suppress the book as a whole meant that about to 35,000 words were redacted from the first draft.

OWENS: Well, among other things your choice of pseudonyms, though used by necessity, are brilliant in the book.

CARLE: (laughter) Thank you. You're the first to comment.

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