

Confessionals for waterboarding

by *Lionel_Van_Deerlin*

Some years ago, alerted by shoppers' charges that breakfast foods were marketed in boxes deceptively exaggerating the amount of cereal they contained, a delegation from the House Commerce Committee looked in on a Baltimore food firm to see if the consumer complaints were well founded. They were.

A manufacturer claiming to have developed an automobile bumper capable of resisting body damage at speeds above 25 mph was invited to demonstrate his product against a concrete wall in the House parking garage. When a surgeon general was convinced that cigarette smoking caused cancer, he sent a chest surgeon to Capitol Hill with a bagful of lungs taken from human cadavers - their varying discoloration betraying the extent that each of the victims had smoked.

Actual demonstration. That is what's needed whenever serious disagreement arises on an important matter. As with the question of the moment: Does waterboarding constitute torture, or does it not?

First, a brief primer for the uninitiated. Waterboarding requires no training or unusual equipment - only a sloping surface, a container of water and some sturdy Saran wrap or similar sealer fixed across the shackled subject's mouth. This blocks inhalation while preventing the expulsion of water that quickly fills his sinuses.

We've heard the subject argued endlessly in recent months. Thus far, however, it's been nothing more than opinions. So how about a demonstration - or a series of demonstrations, maybe - to resolve this issue once and for all? The answer would determine whether our treatment of war prisoners violated international law, whether we've been lied to by top functionaries of the Bush administration, and - oh, happy day - whether the United States may blithely continue with a practice frowned upon by most of the civilized world.

Any credible test of waterboarding will of course call for volunteers. It seems to me that administration higher-ups who have been the most emphatic defenders of the practice (while steadfastly denying that it is torture) should be eager to prove themselves right. To put their nasal passages where their mouths are, if that is not an unpleasant mix of metaphors.

I'm prepared to exempt the first volunteer who comes to mind - the president himself. Respect for the office, you know. Whatever their view on torture, I cannot imagine most Americans comfortable at seeing the commander in chief lying supine, his head lower than his torso, his face obliterated by some of waterboarding's essentials - that Saran wrap and perhaps a damp towel.

Moreover, we all know how stubborn George Bush can be. He might actually rather die than wriggle free and thus prove he'd been wrong about something.

So let's pass on the president. That leads to No. 2, Dick Cheney. A longtime booster of waterboarding, and of torture in general, Cheney could hardly be exempted from our testing as easily as he managed those five deferments from Vietnam. But in addition to being old enough for Social Security, Cheney has been treated for heart trouble. To be persuasive, our test calls for a volunteer of unchallenged health and vigor.

Attorney General Mike Mukasey? Even older than Cheney. So let me next suggest Lewis "Scooter" Libby, who shared office space with Cheney before his perjury conviction last year. Having set aside Libby's prison sentence aside, the president should be happy to grant the fellow a full pardon if he can help end public doubts on waterboarding. Every hawkish neoconservative should think this a "win-win" solution. Who can forget the unanimity with which a half-dozen or so insiders helped make the case for war in Iraq, and for the medieval torture our government calls "enhanced interrogation?"

One small problem, though. Some of these armchair combatants may have glimpsed a recent piece in The Wall Street Journal. It was about waterboarding, and a handful of Americans whose curiosity has led them to try it. Like Jean-Pierre Larroque, a Peace Corps volunteer in the Albuquerque, N.M., suburb of Rancho Rio. He persuaded a couple of friends to put him through the process on a dirt surface, and on videotape. After no more than 10 seconds, Larroque bolted upright in order to resume breathing.

Others have submitted on live television to informal "tests" of the disputed method. These include retired Army veteran Kaj Larsen on the program "Current TV," and Wesley Sherman, a Knoxville, Tenn., teenager, on the YouTube site.

To be sure, all of these nongovernmental experimenters assured the Journal they think what they endured is torture.

I'd rather hear it from some of waterboarding's early boosters.

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