

Rodrigo Lazo – Dirty Wars

Study and Discussion Questions for First Lecture:

1. What are the conditions outlined in the formal/legal definition of torture in the United Nations Convention (Article 1)?
2. How does that definition differ from other uses of the word “torture”?
3. Why is it difficult to talk about torture?
4. Has the representation of torture become a routine part of entertainment in the United States? Can you think of examples from TV, movies, or other forms of entertainment in which torture comes up?
5. Explain the “ticking bomb” scenario. What is this scenario compelling? How do people use it in your readings?
6. What are some objections to the ticking bomb scenario? (You can elaborate on questions #5 and #6 with references to the readings by Dershowitz and Scarry’s response to him.)
7. What are some of the national security or even patriotic arguments for the use of torture? What are the objections to those arguments? Can you link this to your other readings from the fall?
8. What are the effects of video games that portray torture?
9. What are the recent historical conditions that lead to the United States using torture?
10. Summarize Alberto R. Gonzales’s argument in his memorandum to the president and explain why he thinks the Taliban and al Qaeda fighters should not be granted prisoner-of-war protections.
11. How does Gonzales treat counterarguments? Do you agree with his conclusions?
12. Gonzales’s argument is based on positing a similarity between Al Qaeda and the Taliban? Is that similarity accurate or fair? (Requires extra reading or research.)

QUESTIONS for Alan Dershowitz, “Tortured Reasoning” and Elaine Scarry’s Response

1. Dershowitz opens with a claim that he is actually arguing against “tortured reasoning.” What is that reasoning? What do you think of his play on the word torture?

2. Dershowitz responds to the slippage between supporting warrants and condoning torture. But is there a correlation to be made?
3. How does Dershowitz establish credibility (ethos)?
4. Judging from the style and approach of this article, who do you think is his audience?
5. Dershowitz's argument is influenced by the Israeli context. Why is that important?
6. What are some examples of Dershowitz using euphemisms for torture?
5. What parts of his argument do you find persuasive? Or not?
6. Toward the end of the essay, Dershowitz brings up important values. What are those values? Which others would you add as important values to debates about torture?
7. In Scarry's response, what does she say about the ticking bomb?
8. How does her title, "Five Errors in the Reasoning of Alan Dershowitz," respond to his use of the words "tortured reasoning."
9. Why is she opposed to the "legal impunity" of the warrants?
10. How does she respond to the "form and style" of Dershowitz's argument?
11. Why does she say Dershowitz is not to be taken lightly? What does that say about his role as a public figure and the places where his writings circulate?