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Torture and profit

Government sidesteps morality, accountability

By Andy Opel

MY VIEW

While in Canada recently, I saw the new film “Rendition” about the same time I watched Condoleezza Rice testify about the U.S. government policy of extraordinary rendition.

Here is a basic summary of real life: The U.S. government has a program in which foreign nationals suspected of terrorist connections can be secretly detained and flown to countries around the world that are known to practice torture.

The CIA then works with local interrogators, who perform the actual torture. The documented torture techniques include beating, electrical shocks and waterboarding. And, yes, waterboarding is torture according to our laws, going as far back as 1902.

In the Hollywood version, Omar Metwally plays Omar El-Ibrahimi, an Egyptian-born engineer who is married to Reese Witherspoon's character and lives happily in Michigan with their child.

This American dream is burst when El-Ibrahimi is detained while returning home from a business trip in South Africa. The film then details the torture he endures in an unidentified North African prison while a CIA officer, played by Jake Gyllenhaal, supervises the interrogation. The scenes are graphic and disturbing, but in the classic Hollywood tradition, the injustice is corrected and audience members can leave the theater relieved that the wrongly accused were tortured for only a short time.

Unfortunately for audience members and U.S. citizens, the real story is not a happy ending and the process depicted in the film continues day after day, paid for by our tax dollars and supported by government policy.

The night after viewing the film, I watched Rice testify before the House Foreign Relations Committee about Maher Arar, a Canadian citizen who was detained in New York, flown to Syria and tortured for 10 months before being released without charge.

The film “Rendition” is said to be loosely based on the Arar case, so the timing of was particularly chilling. All Secretary of State Rice was willing to admit was that the U.S. “mishandled” the case, and that the U.S. does not send people to countries where they will be tortured.

The Canadian government has apologized and paid Arar \$10 million for its role in working with U.S. officials. The U.S. continues to keep Arar on a do-not-fly list and refuses to let him into this country to visit his extended family. *Time* magazine in April named Arar one of the 100 most influential people, and Jimmy Carter cites Arar's story in his 2005 book, “Our Endangered Values.”

The blurring of fact and fiction between the film and Rice's statements raises troubling questions for Americans who still believe in the rule of law. Why would we send a Canadian citizen to Syria when

we often refer to Syria as part of the axis of evil? How many other people have been “disappeared”? Who are the companies involved in this process and how many of our tax dollars are going into the pockets of private contractors hired to fly terror suspects to torture destinations?

What we do know is that Jeppesen Dataplan Inc., a Boeing subsidiary, has flown more than 70 flights for the CIA. Closer to home, *The New York Times* reports that a Florida-based company, Presidential Aviation, leased the Gulfstream III jet that flew Arar from the U.S. to Syria on Oct. 2, 2002. The flight is estimated to have cost the U.S. government more than \$100,000. By using private jets, the CIA is able to evade scrutiny of public officials and leave families wondering, “Where did Dad go?” because the other side of this story is the wall of government denial that families face when they try to understand where their husbands and fathers have gone.

The work of Jeppesen, Presidential Aviation and others who are accepting money to serve this program is a new form of war profiteering, what we can now call torture profiteering. As we privatize the war and allow more transactions to occur that are outside the reach of public accountability, we see new levels of complicity with illegal and immoral government policies.

These are not the actions of civilized people leading the world toward a more democratic future. Secrecy, denial, torture and international detention are the hallmarks of dictatorships, governments we spent the 20th century fighting to overthrow. To abandon the rule of law during trying times is to admit a fundamental weakness in our justice system.

If we can honor civil rights only during times of peace, then we are no better than the tyrants and butchers who rule through fear and pain. We have a choice in these matters, and the choice begins with calling our own government to account and holding everyone to the rule of law, including the president. n

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