

*Oath Betrayed: Torture, Medical Complicity, and the War on Terror*  
by Steven H. Miles, M. D. (Random House. New York. 2006)

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number of words in the body of the review: 765

We all come to big issues like torture and terror from our own biographies. We cannot be dispassionate when compelled to reflect on horrific events that cause cognitive dissonance or worse. So let me begin this review with a conversation over a cup of coffee in Washington DC, earlier this year.

I met Steven Miles in a restaurant before this book was published. Miles is a soft-spoken physician from Minneapolis, MN, where he is a Professor of Medicine at the University of Minnesota Medical School and a faculty member of the Center for Bioethics. He looks and sounds quintessentially professorial, with a pleasant smile and an easy manner.

Yet our conversation was almost conspiratorial in tone, even though the 35,000 documents Miles consulted for this book were in the public domain, thanks to the ACLU and FOIA. Nothing we discussed was really a secret. But Miles had had to discover the meaning of links between documents for himself, connecting the dots from document to document (the documents in were separate files, the connections between them not easily searchable by software.) He had to correlate the movements of military physicians with diverse places and events.

As he discussed his research, outrage and rage burned through Miles' restrained demeanor. He described how doctors had aided and abetted torture in Iraq, Guantanamo, and other places, some still hidden from view.

That our conversation about documents in the public domain in a public place should feel conspiratorial is a tip-off to what it does to us to enter the world of this book. We were not being paranoid—we were experiencing the impact of confronting what is being done in the name of the war on terror and in our name as Americans in a secret world.

Researchers like Miles often show the effects of “secondary trauma,” a therapist told me, alerting me to my own symptoms. Immersing oneself in this world results in predictable consequences. We become obsessed with the truth, an elusive quarry under any conditions, and our moral framework skews toward the binary. In the face of traumatic

events, whether experienced first or second hand, evil seems easy to distinguish from good.

Whether it is a conversation in a restaurant or the experience of reading this book – that’s what can happen.

“I am often asked if my life is in danger, because of this research,” Miles told me. “That’s an epiphenomenon of being a torturing society. A torturing society is a society that is abraded by the process of dehumanization. In that process, we essentially create our own mirrored netherworlds.”

The distortion of our thinking, our behavior, our moral compass, as our society justifies, rationalizes, and minimizes the impact of engaging in state torture is inevitable.

That is the deeper subtext of Miles’ book, which documents and illuminates how some doctors have kept prisoners alive as they are tortured and interrogated and have falsified death certificates to substitute natural causes for torture as the cause of death. *Oath Betrayed* shows how the oath sworn by doctors to do no harm is turned on its head in the name of fighting terror.

This book is a plea for justice, an attempt to reinforce the reasons why America rejected torture in the past as ineffective and inhumane for both practical and moral reasons. Miles believes that a society which allows discourse about such events will be affected for the better as consciences are quickened and resolve strengthened. The existence of this book is an act of hope and affirmation.

Miles also knows that discussing these issues does not expose him to the risks faced by colleagues in other countries, who have been tortured themselves or killed for speaking out. He knows that we still have relative freedom of speech. But for freedom of speech to be more than a bleeder valve, it must lead to action. In a society saturated with fictional and non-fictional accounts of violence and torture, we have been desensitized to the reality that Miles urges us to confront. It is not easy to read this book. Miles asks that we swim in the deeper waters of the moral, ethical and psychological consequences of our policies and practices, that we understand what it does to us to become a torturing society. Unlike screen violence, he does not do so to produce a vicarious shiver, but so that we will re-examine the thinking that led us to such practices in the first place.

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Richard Thieme is an author and professional speaker focused on the social and cultural implications of technology, religion, and science.