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The Scary Caterpillar

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INSECTS have been conscripted as weapons of war, tools of terrorism and instruments of torture for thousands of years. So should we be surprised by the news that the C.I.A. considered using these creatures to instill fear in Abu Zubaydah, a terrorist suspect? Yes, and here's why.

The earliest hypothesized uses of insects in human conflicts involved bees and wasps. During the Upper Paleolithic period, nests of stinging insects — evidently contained within baskets or pottery — were heaved into rocky caves or thorny stockades to drive an enemy into the open. Employing insects to destroy crops or transmit disease would not develop until modern times (unless we include Yahweh's assaults on Pharaoh in Exodus). However, entomological torture continued to play a role throughout history.

The ancient Persians developed a gruesome practice called scaphism, which involved force-feeding a person milk and honey, lashing him to a boat or hollow tree trunk, and then allowing flies to infest the victim's anus and increasingly gangrenous flesh. Siberian tribes simply tied a naked prisoner to a tree and allowed mosquitoes and other biting flies to deliver as many as 9,000 bites per minute — a rate sufficient to drain a person's blood by half in about two hours. And the stories of Apaches staking captives on anthills to ensure lingering and painful deaths are not merely the stuff of Hollywood westerns.

The epitome of insectan torture was developed by a 19th-century emir of Bukhara, in present-day Uzbekistan. He threw political enemies into a bug pit, a deep hole covered with an iron grille and stocked with sheep ticks and assassin bugs. The bite of the latter has been compared to being pierced with a hot needle, and the injected saliva digested the victims' tissues until, in the words of the emir's jailer, "masses of their flesh had been gnawed off their bones."

So what's surprising about the United States exploiting a prisoner's entomophobia? This appears to be the first case in which insects would have been used to inflict psychological terror. Solzhenitsyn described the use of bedbug-infested boxes in the Soviet gulags, but it seems that these were intended to cause physical suffering — and the Central Intelligence

Agency operatives evidently planned to use a physically harmless insect. (A caterpillar was mentioned.)

After having seemingly exhausted the nefarious uses of insects as unwitting agents in human conflict, the United States managed to find a new way — 100,000 or so years after humans first inflicted pain on one another with bees and wasps — to exploit the natural world as a means of creating suffering.

There are many arguments against torture. One is practical: If we torture others, they might torture us. This applies to psychological torture, too.

What if a terrorist group announced that their operatives had introduced Rift Valley fever into the United States? This mosquito-borne disease would make West Nile virus look like a case of the sniffles. Given that virtually every corner of America has a native species of mosquito capable of transmitting the virus, Rift Valley fever could spread across the nation. Hundreds of thousands of people could be sickened, with thousands dying and many more falling blind. The livestock industry could lose billions of dollars as animals aborted their fetuses and succumbed to bloody diarrhea. Imagine the fear if every mosquito bite this summer could be the precursor of a disease that would cause your brain to become inflamed or your internal organs to hemorrhage?

The chances of this happening are slim. The terrorists might even be bluffing. But terrorism — and torture — can be psychological.

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