

The Animal Zealotry That Destroyed Our Lab

By MARK S. BLUMBERG

"Are you lying down?" my wife asked me over the phone. It was Sunday, Nov. 14 of last year, and I was just waking up in my hotel room in Madison, Wis., where I'd gone to visit my sister and her son for the weekend. My wife's question — especially her urgent tone — triggered a cascade of sickening thoughts. Soon, I was racing home to Iowa.

Although the pieces only came together over the next several days, the bare facts were these: Early that morning, at least five individuals had illegally entered the research facility at the University of Iowa where my colleagues and I, all professors of psychology and neuroscience, work. The intruders broke into offices and laboratories, dumped acid and other chemicals and destroyed equipment. They also "liberated" the animals — primarily rats and mice — used in our studies of such basic behavioral and biological processes as learning, memory, temperature regulation and sleep. One of my graduate students arrived at work early that morning and discovered, in bold red spray paint, the slogans that are the hallmarks of the Animal Liberation Front (ALF): "Science not sadism" and "Free the animals."

With this break-in, my department had become the latest poster child of the animal rights movement. After years of escalating attacks on research facilities in the United Kingdom, animal rights and environmental extremists have turned to North America, which is fast becoming a breeding ground for their type of violence. But because the number of individuals affected is still relatively small, most Americans remain unaware of the seriousness of the threats. As my experience shows, even among decision-makers, few are taking it seriously enough.

The care of laboratory animals isn't, as some seem to believe, an unregulated field. As scientists engaged in government-sponsored research, we must conform to an exhaustive array of local, state and federal rules. Nor are we unthinking about these animals' use. As scientists, we debate it among ourselves and with others, as all thoughtful individuals do when dealing with issues of life and death. What happened in Iowa, though, was not a debate; it was an assault.

For us, the break-in set off a chain of events that one might expect after an attack of such magnitude. Our unassuming buildings at the edge of campus were cordoned off as local, state and then federal law enforcement personnel descended. With the closing of these buildings, the daily lives of hundreds of faculty, staff and students were disrupted. Experts in the handling of hazardous materials spent weeks identifying and removing the corrosive chemicals that had been dumped inside.

The cost of the cleanup, replacement of valuable equipment and purchasing of new animals totaled in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Contrary to initial reports, relatively little data were lost (in part because the attackers seemed more concerned with smashing computers than erasing hard drives) although even small losses can have far-reaching consequences for research.

Instead, it was the human cost that was most devastating. Imagine the horror of walking into your office at work, as one of my young colleagues did, to find computers, books and personal effects (such as ultrasound images of your unborn child) soaked in acid. Then, imagine having to don a chemical protection suit for several days and sift through multiple 55-gallon drums filled with acid-soaked papers, photocopying those that are still readable as they crumble in your hand.

Unfortunately, the attack on the building is where our story begins, not ends. For what followed was a series of well-orchestrated harassments. First came the e-mailing of a communique to the media, detailing the crime and the rationale for targeting our facility and the individuals who work there. Each of us was singled out for derision; I was colorfully described as having a "famously deranged mind" because of my research on the similarities between the high-pitched squeals of infant rats and the life-sustaining grunts of human preemies in respiratory distress.

Some of ALF's statements produced the desired chilling effect: "Let this message be clear to all who victimize the innocent," the e-mail read. "We're watching. And by axe, drill, or crowbar — we're coming through your door. Stop or be stopped." Later in that document, the brazen and indiscriminate nature of their threat was revealed when, after noting "the established link between violence towards animals and that towards humans," they listed "as a public safety measure" our names, our spouse's names, home addresses and phone numbers, as well as information about our students.

Next came the video. Several days after the communique, local journalists informed a group of us that a surreptitious delivery had brought a 50-minute videotape of the crime. Would we be interested in seeing it? Within an hour, two colleagues and I found ourselves huddled together in front of a small television set in a local newsroom, watching in dismay as these individuals — clearly youthful

despite being hidden behind hoods, masks and gloves — paraded through our facility, smashing delicate instruments with oversize hammers and transferring rats and mice to plastic cages. It was particularly difficult for me to watch as my infant rats, along with their mothers, were thrown together with several other adults, knowing (as these animal "liberators" apparently did not) that cannibalism of the young was the likely outcome. There was no video of that.

In the weeks thereafter, our attackers and their allies kept up their campaign. There were press conferences by local agitators, freedom of information requests, midnight phone calls, a well-publicized visit by a nationally known pro-ALF speaker whose message was that more attacks were needed. And then came the magazines. They started as a trickle, but soon my mailbox was deluged with dozens catering to every taste: *Canoe & Kayak*, *Guns & Ammo*, *Fit Pregnancy*, *Muscle Mustangs & Fast Fords*. It's simple but ingenious: tear out those little subscription cards, apply a label, and send it in. No hassle, no mess. In total, nearly 450 subscriptions were directed at us, 160 to me alone. Funny? Perhaps, unless you consider how you would respond to such an onslaught, including the invoices and, ultimately, the credit agencies that followed.

When we learned that a Senate panel would be addressing the issue of animal rights extremism in May, we thought that some relief was imminent. Groups like the Southern Poverty Law Center and Anti-Defamation League have been keeping an eye on the growing violence. Critics have pointed out financial donations, overlapping personnel and supportive public statements that raise questions about a possible relationship between above-ground groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and fringe groups like ALF. We hoped that such evidence had accumulated to the point that a concerted and bipartisan effort might finally affect their formidable fundraising apparatus. We were sadly disappointed.

We were encouraged that the president of our university had been called as a witness and that our experiences of the past several months would receive some high-level attention. Unfortunately, the hearing quickly devolved into a partisan disagreement. Incredibly, the senators seemed more interested in protecting their favored activist groups from scrutiny than in determining which groups actually posed significant threats to the lives and livelihoods of law-abiding citizens. Most galling were the comments of Sen. Frank Lautenberg, a Democrat from New Jersey, who seemed miffed that his time was being wasted on such fluff. Incredulous of the testimony provided by the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), in which violent animal rights and environmental extremists were identified as among our most serious domestic terrorism threats, Lautenberg asked facetiously who the next target would be: "Right to Life? Sierra Club?" Then, he inexplicably proclaimed himself "a tree hugger."

I later made several attempts to contact Lautenberg about his comments, via fax, phone and e-mail, but never received a response.

I was a victim of a violent crime once before. While on break from college in the early 1980s, I was sitting in my parents' home in Chevy Chase reading a book when, suddenly, I looked up and found myself staring into the barrels of two snub-nosed revolvers. The intruders tied me up and robbed the house, then left silently. As traumatic as that event was, its effect on me was fleeting. I was angry, yes, but I did not feel terrorized. These home invaders clearly did not hate me for who I was or what I did. They did not issue a communique declaring that others should attack me. They did not release a video to force me to relive the indignity of the event. And they did not encourage their minions to engage in further harassments. Terrorists, no matter what their cause, seek political change through violence and intimidation. Is it essential that we label animal rights extremists as terrorists? Perhaps not, unless such a label helps us — and especially politicians — to better appreciate the seriousness of the threat and to marshal the necessary law enforcement resources.

Because the threat is serious. Today, scientists, clinicians and educators find themselves engaged in a seemingly endless string of pitched battles: over the teaching of intelligent design in our public school classrooms, over the availability of stem cells to treat degenerative diseases, over the rights of severely brain-damaged individuals to die. If we focus on the conventional politics that drive these conflicts — right vs. left — we miss the bigger picture.

In fact, what ties all of them together is a common distrust of and disdain for science, for empirically based medicine, for the value of evidence and critical analysis, and for progress in a free and open society. Moreover, and perhaps most alarming, is the adoption by certain groups of increasingly violent action to achieve their political aims. Indeed, the mounting acceptance of intimidation and violence within the anti-abortion movement eerily parallels the escalating tactics of animal rights extremists. Thus, the ideology and goals of these groups may align at opposite ends of the political spectrum, but their tactics have converged. As we know, a number of abortion doctors have already been killed, and some animal rights extremists seem to approve of physical violence as a tactic. It's only a matter of time before someone takes the next step. Whom will Lautenberg hug then?

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Slippery slope? Chile enjoyed a reputation for dignity and democracy before a 1973 military coup opened an era of brutality. The country is still recovering; above, anti-Pinochet protesters in January 2000.

Torture's Echoes

What Chile Can Teach Us About Ourselves

By PAMELA CONSTABLE

In the summer of 1990, I drove through Chile with a list of names, looking for survivors of a certain kind. They were mostly middle-aged or elderly men, retired mayors and labor leaders and peasant activists. All had been imprisoned by the secret police in the military-ruled 1970s, and all had been tortured.

Even after many years, they were embarrassed and pained to talk about their ordeals, especially the more disgusting aspects. One man had been forced to eat his own excrement. Another had been subjected to simulated rape by German shepherds. A third had been locked inside a sweltering metal container with two other prisoners on the grounds of an abandoned villa with a swimming pool.

"We were cramped together, never allowed to wash. The heat and the stench were terrible," he told me, his hands trembling. "In the dark, we could hear screams all day and sobbing all night. . . . The guards would splash in the pool and pass by the cells, saying they were going to kill this one and castrate that one. I don't know if you call that torture, but it was horrible."

Hearing those stories, I felt sickened and shocked, often unable to eat until the next day. I could not reconcile the dignified, literate culture I had come to know with the sordid, vengeful acts people described. It seemed as if Chile's values had been turned upside down by dictatorship, with thugs imprisoning intellectuals and respectable people pretending nothing was wrong.

Eventually, democracy returned to Chile, and I moved on to other conflicts, other stories. But now, more than a decade later, I have found myself confronting the question of torture again. This time, it is not in the dungeons of a South American dictatorship — so easy to dismiss as beyond the pale — but in the detention facilities of American military forces. And this time, I have begun to worry about what it is doing to my own society, as we hear reports of abuses and look the other way.

In my work as a foreign correspondent, I have interviewed men released from U.S. detention in Afghanistan who described a variety of abuses, some of which appeared aimed less at intelligence gathering than at humiliation and debasement. One dignified police officer, who had worked briefly for the police during Taliban rule, told me his U.S. captors had photographed him naked, mocked him while he used the toilet and twisted him like a pretzel. Kneeling on his parlor carpet, he contorted himself into excruciating positions to demonstrate what they had done to him.

"I kept begging them for water and they would spray something on my face, so I had to lick the drops," the 47-year-old officer told me several weeks after his release. "They covered my face and told me they put a snake and a scorpion on my neck. I thought I was going to die, but they were always laughing, like it was a joke."

As I listened to him, the stories from that Chilean summer 15 years ago came rushing back. Once more, I tried to reconcile conflicting images — the liberating mission of American troops who drank tea with welcoming village elders, and the sadistic practices apparently flourishing in dark, secret cells.

Few Americans will ever meet a survivor of torture, and many may find it almost impossible to believe what they read about abuses committed by U.S. troops — about the shy Afghan taxi driver who died in American custody after being hung by the wrists, choked in a hood, and forced to roll back and forth kissing his captors' boots; the Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison who were piled into naked tanks, photographed on leashes, threatened with snarling dogs and mock electrocution.

I can understand why there has not been more public outrage over these abuses. When an elusive enemy bombs the London transit system, when American troops are being shot out of the sky in Afghanistan, when diplomats are being assassinated and aid workers beheaded in Baghdad, we are all filled with impotent rage. We want to lash out, to punish, to get even. We want madness stopped and murderers caught.

If some interrogator in a dark corner of the war on terror is squeezing a prisoner who might be an Islamic terrorist a little harder right now, we don't really want to know about it. If coercion or intimidation can prevent a future bombing, break up a suicide cell, save a hundred innocent lives, is it not a necessary evil?

Yes, possibly, under extremely limited conditions. But studies have shown that building trust and dependence is a far more reliable way to break resistance, while humiliation always hardens hatred and pain often produces desperate lies. More-

over, once we accept the controlled, professional use of "exceptional measures" to interrogate a few hardened fanatics, it can be a short and slippery slope to a generalized climate of absolute power and swaggering license in which untrained guards are permitted to abuse and humiliate prisoners for sport or revenge.

The consequences can also resonate far beyond the prisons, damaging societies in ways that can be long-lasting and insidious. Stretching laws to permit abusive treatment of prisoners, employing doctors to probe the limits of pain, finding exceptional justification for practices routinely condemned in other countries — all this can corrode the moral authority of a government and the norms of a free society. That's what happened in Chile during its 17 years of dictatorship.

Before the military coup, Chile was known as an unusually law-abiding and democratic country in a continent of unstable, coup-prone republics. Its parliament included parties from ultra-conservative to communist, its presidents were elected peacefully, its judges and civil servants were respected; corruption was minimal and civic life was spirited.

Then came Sept. 11, 1973. Amid a rising tide of political and labor agitation, with a socialist president in office and the middle class terrified of a popular uprising, the army stepped in, vowing to extirpate communism from Chilean soil. Many people were grimly grateful for the respite from democracy run amok. Legislators went home, judges accommodated military demands and respectable citizens turned away when long-haired youths were dragged into unmarked cars.

Within months the left was virtually exterminated, but the abuses continued. Thousands of people were detained, tortured and killed by the military and secret police. In the process, a culture of fear, mistrust and denial replaced a tradition of freedom and debate. The resulting rifts — among neighbors, colleagues, even families — were so bitter that only now, 15 years after the return to civilian rule, is Chile beginning to reknit, face the truth and acknowledge its complicity in dictatorship. As a conservative politician acknowledged recently, "We all failed as a society."

I don't mean to push the analogy too far. Nobody is dragging American citizens off to clandestine dungeons; most detainees in U.S. custody are foreigners of alien tongue and faith, classified as "enemy combatants" and held on foreign soil. But while some may well be terrorists, others are luckless innocents or dupes, more victims than aggressors. More than 30 people have died in American custody overseas, and others have been secretly shipped to foreign countries long condemned by the U.S. government for practicing torture.

In Afghanistan, many prisoners and ex-prisoners I interviewed were illiterate villagers who had been manipulated and fed lies about the West, taught that its leaders sought to destroy their religion and that its women were prostitutes and devils. One young man literally shrank from me in his cell, covering his eyes and ears to protect himself from my contamination. I felt so sorry for him that I immediately apologized and left the room.

To interrogate a fanatical bomber is one thing. But to force a devout Muslim to masturbate or eat pork or bark like a dog only reinforces stereotypes of Western vulgarity and arrogance — and aids the recruitment of religious insurgents willing to kill and die in places like Iraq.

Just as worrisome is the subtler numbing effect on American society when the idea of torture begins to seem acceptable, even normal; when it becomes euphemized as "extreme duress" or "coercive" interrogation and practiced by protagonists in TV dramas. It is easier for us to ignore when it happens to non-Americans far away and out of sight, but it still confronts us with a moral choice.

I don't think America is in immediate danger of losing its ethical compass and abandoning its principles. The military has investigated some of the most egregious known abuse charges; some lower-ranking perpetrators have been punished; senior administration officials repeatedly assert they do not condone torture. And yet in less than four years, we have already become a more belligerent, hardened, unapologetic culture, where the vehicle du jour is an imitation Humvee and critics of military policy or prison abuses find their patriotism called into question.

As long as there are American troops overseas, the nation must rally behind them and pray for their safe return. But if we hope to set an example for the world, to rob Islamic extremists of their ammunition for jihad — to truly defeat terrorism — we cannot do it by waging a dirty war in the shadows. As long as one hooded captive is screaming in a dungeon at America's behest, we are all participants in torture, and we are all its victims.

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Making their point: The intruders had several goals in their raid on the University of Iowa labs.



Leaving a spray-painted message under the name of the Animal Liberation Front . . .



. . . removing hundreds of animals — mostly rats and mice — used in the labs' research . . .



. . . and destroying both computers and testing equipment. These images are taken from a tape made by the trespassers.

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