

Importing U.S. 'goods' ... including torture

HIDDEN TERRORS, by A.J. Langguth (Pantheon Books, 308 pages, \$10).

Reviewed by Geoffrey Fox

On July 31, 1970, an obscure former police chief from Richmond, Ind., was kidnapped by urban guerrillas (Tupamaros) in Montevideo, Uruguay. Ten days later, after the Uruguayan government had refused to release 150 political prisoners and had launched a massive hunt for his captors, 50-year-old Daniel A. Mitrione was found shot to death on the back seat of a stolen 1948 Buick convertible.

Mitrione had joined the U.S. Office of Public Safety in 1960, primarily, according to A.J. Langguth, to make more money to support his large family. His job was to procure tear gas, radios and more sophisticated police hardware for police in Brazil, and later in Uruguay, and train them in their use. Like other OPS advisers in other lands—including Vietnam, Iran and other Third World countries—he also instructed police on methods of interrogation more effective and more painful than the traditional techniques of beating.

In the mid-1960s, the OPS and its International Police Academy, where Mitrione was an instructor from 1967 to 1969, began to push electric shock torture as the most effective way to break a prisoner's resistance. The CIA's Technical Services Division in Washington, Langguth tells us, was "developing devices to make the pain so sharp that a prisoner would break quickly and not force a police interrogator to hurt him repeatedly." Wires are run from a generator (supplied by the U.S. Agency for International Development) to the man's or woman's genitals, teeth and other sensitive parts, while the victim's body is suspended in a position convenient for the torturer and painful for the tortured; then a scientifically-calculated electric charge is run through the body. Doctors are in attendance, not to succour the suffering prisoners, but to revive them.

The use of this excruciating torture, a U.S. import, is especially well documented for Chile, Uruguay and Brazil, but its use is much more widespread. The Uruguayan protest singer Daniel Viglietti has said that in Argentina and Uruguay, his records are played during torture in an apparent attempt to associate protest with pain.

Traditional ways of life in the Third World are being undermined by a growing dependency on imported goods, declining value of primary products, absorption of even the remotest villages into the international market system, and the increasing size and increasing poverty of the urban population. Peasants' leagues, trade unions, student associations, professional and small business organizations, and the as yet unorganized poor are all pressing for reforms which would redistribute the wealth in some manner and would cut into the exceedingly high profit margins of transnational corporations.

The U.S. government's strategy, from Kennedy to Carter, has been to stimulate "self-help" projects for the poor (for example, through the Peace Corps) and to pressure the elites to carry out cosmetic reforms, while at the same time developing massive police repression to prevent any threats to U.S. capital investments.

An unfortunate but, for the State Department, acceptable cost of this policy has been the suppression of civil liberties and the electoral process in numerous countries, of which Chile, Argentina and Thailand are the most recent examples. Now, with popular participation out of the way, the military regimes of these countries are pursuing a strategy of encouraging still greater economic penetration by foreign enterprises, which has a kind of "trickle up" effect of enriching the ruling elite. To maintain this system, the lessons learned and equipment obtained from the Office of Public Safety and its successors (the OPS was formally abolished in 1972) have been invaluable.

A Navy veteran, a tough cop, a strongly pro-American son of Italian immigrants, Dan Mitrione appears to have seen no ethical problems in his job. He was simultaneously victim and agent of a United States government strategy for preventing social revolution in Latin America. The public face of this strategy was the "Alliance for Progress," with its economic and technical aid programs for improving the lot of the Latin American masses; its hidden face was a network of political repression including CIA covert actions, a modern technology of torture, and police advisers like Dan Mitrione.

Langguth, a Minneapolis native and foreign correspondent, has written a book that is unnecessarily difficult to read, because he has chosen to break up his narrative with flashbacks and interspersed passages telling other, related stories of U.S. officials and Latin American revolutionaries. The style is awkward and cliché-ridden. But despite these faults, it is a useful book for the new information from Langguth's interviews and the extensive documentation of a story that is a national disgrace.

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