

*Two books on interrogation by [Matthew Alexander](#) are reviewed in the context of Osama bin Laden's execution, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's waterboarding, and the US debate on torture.*

[\*How To Break a Terrorist: The US Interrogators Who Used Brains, Not Brutality\*](#)

[\*To Take Down the Deadliest Man in Iraq\*](#)

By Matthew Alexander with John R. Bruning

Free Press. 289 pp. \$26

[\*Kill Or Capture: How a Special Operations Task Force\*](#)

[\*Took Down a Notorious Al Qaeda Terrorist\*](#)

By Matthew Alexander

St. Martin's Press. 292 pp. \$25.99

Kill or Capture, Torture or Deceive

*By Gary Kern*

OBL & KSM

When President Barack Obama announced the assassination of Osama bin Laden (OBL) on Sunday night of May 1 this year, nearly a decade after the al-Qaeda “planes operation” against New York city and Washington DC succeeded with devastating effect, members of the George W. Bush administration, which had failed to locate the leader of al-Qaeda anywhere in the world for seven years, felt obliged to explain their spectacular failure.

In the days immediately following the surprise announcement, former administration officials—Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, senior advisor Karl Rove, Attorney General Michael Mukasey, Director of the National Security Agency (NSA) and afterwards Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Michael Hayden, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith, legal counsel to the Department of Justice John Yoo and press secretary Dana Perino—all appeared on television talk shows and presented a united defense. The apparent failure, they said, was actually a success, or contained the seed of success, because the policies instituted by President Bush to prosecute the Global War on Terror had produced the name of bin Laden’s courier, and the unabated effort to locate and track him was what eventually led to the compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, where the head of al-Qaeda was found in a room on the third floor and shot down.[\[1\]](#)

In particular, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rove, Mukasey, Hayden and Yoo cited the program of Enhanced Interrogation Techniques (EIT) as the primary tool that turned up the crucial clue. Mukasey claimed that al-Qaeda terrorist Khalid Sheik Mohammed (KSM) “broke like a dam under the pressure of harsh interrogation techniques that included waterboarding.” In the flood of information he released, said Mukasey, was the nickname of bin Laden’s trusted courier. Since KSM was captured in Rawalpindi, Pakistan on 1 March 2003, and since his multiple waterboardings occurred that same month, it would follow from Mukasey’s account that the nickname of the courier was obtained at that time, eight years ago.[\[2\]](#)

Also appearing on the talk shows, most of which were broadcast the following Sunday, May 8, was President Obama’s national security advisor, Tom Donilon. On *Meet the Press*, he graciously conceded that the killing of OBL was the result of “an effort across two administrations.” Some of the same intelligence men, he said, had worked on the problem across the political divide. Here, too, the implication, however unintended, was that the EIT program, based on methods of torture used by Communist China, North Korea and the Soviet Union, all enemies of the United States in the Cold War and condemned as torturers by the US throughout that period, had paid off.[\[3\]](#)

This conclusion, whether stated or implied, disturbed Senator John McCain (R-AZ). From his five-year experience as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam, he knew that torture could on occasion produce good intelligence, but often produced bad, since the victim will say almost anything to stop the suffering. Unconvinced by the media Blitz of the former Bush officials, he went straight to the then-Director of the CIA, Leon Panetta, to find out what had happened. In a *Washington Post* op-ed published on May 11, McCain reported that Mukasey got it wrong. According to Panetta, KSM did not cough up the name of the courier after being waterboarded 183 times. On the contrary, another detainee “who we believe was not tortured” had provided the nickname Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, and KSM, when asked about him, stated that al-Kuwaiti had dropped out of al-Qaeda, gotten married and moved to Peshawar. All of KSM’s information on this point was false, said McCain. He concluded that the waterboarding of KSM had failed, the Bush administration’s defense of EITs was misleading and American values needed to be

upheld even in times of war and chaos, because “we are always Americans, and different, stronger and better than those who would destroy us.”[\[4\]](#)

The conflicting accounts do not end there. On Fareed Zakaria’s *Global Public Square* program of May 8, former CIA Director Michael Hayden, described by Zakaria as “one of America’s great spymasters,” preempted McCain with a different version of the KSM story. KSM, he said, was softened up by waterboarding and made cooperative, but provided only “some very partial lead information” at that time (2003). In 2007, after five full years of seeking bin Laden by means of technical surveillance, CIA experts finally concluded that he had gone off the grid and was communicating exclusively by word of mouth and courier. Finding his courier then became top priority. Available prisoners in CIA “black sites” were subjected to EITs in order “to move them from an air of defiance into a zone of cooperation,” and afterwards one of them under questioning produced the nickname of bin Laden’s courier.

Thus Hayden made the case for waterboarding and other EITs as methods that worked to “soften up” prisoners and get them to talk, though over a period of years. Hayden preceded Panetta as director of the CIA. So when McCain asked Panetta about these events, he must have consulted Hayden. On the previous Tuesday, May 3, in an NBC interview with Brian Williams, Panetta admitted that EITs were used in the effort to track down OBL. Under gentle but determined questioning by the anchor, he further acknowledged that EITs include waterboarding, but he stopped short of mentioning stress positions, prolonged standing, prolonged nakedness, freezing, shackling, sleep deprivation, time dislocation, confinement in a coffin-sized box, and other techniques taken from Stalinist prisons. Therefore, when he told McCain that the source for information about the courier “was not tortured,” he excluded these methods from the category of torture.[\[5\]](#)

Hayden concluded his story with Zakaria: The CIA experts, having obtained the nickname of the courier, went back to KSM, but he asserted that the individual in question was not important. His insistence on this point, said Hayden, was out of character with his friendly post-waterboarding behavior and alerted his handlers to the possibility that al-Kuwaiti might, on the contrary, be very important. A second high-value detainee (Abu Faraj al-Libi) behaved the same way as KSM. Thus “Ahmed’s father from Kuwait” (the meaning of the nickname) became the CIA’s top lead. Hayden himself informed President Bush, as the information, he told Zakaria with an impish smile, was ready for “presidential prime time.” Four more years of collecting and collating bits of information about Abu Ahmed, moving forward “a pebble at a time,” were needed to discover the true name of OBL’s courier and to follow him to his master. It was a triumph, said Hayden, of “classic analytical work.”

Naturally, as a great spymaster, Hayden offered no names, couched every sentence in qualifications and appealed frequently to government secrecy about a case already closed and dead, the courier, his wife and his brother having been shot along with OBL. A few months later the White House participated in a television re-enactment, *Targeting bin Laden*, shown on the History Channel, with President Obama, senior aides and Hayden

himself performing as talking heads. Today the deceased al-Kuwaiti, also known as Arshad Khan and Mohammed Arshad, has his own posthumous page on Wikipedia. Nevertheless, many details of the operation, spread across the internet, remain contradictory.[\[6\]](#)

One detail in Hayden's account demands closer scrutiny. Hayden emphasized that had KSM not been made cooperative by waterboarding, the intelligence experts would not have been able to mark the shift in his behavior. Yet such a shift is precisely the kind of thing that happens in a good interrogation, one that does not use torture. When treated well and addressed with respect, a prisoner usually responds to an opening gambit. Of course, he does not blurt out his secrets all at once—or does so only rarely. He is careful not to reveal what he is thinking and not to divulge anything private. He plays the game of humoring or suffering the interrogator, just as the interrogator plays the game of befriending or helping him. Even so, some measure of human contact is established, some interests in common are discovered, a joke or a grievance is shared. All the while the interrogator observes his subject's behavior, keeps track of what he is saying and boxes him in with his own words. A strong reaction is never missed, even when suppressed by an effort of will. The insistent downplaying of a name is a dead giveaway of its importance, because the prisoner has already discounted other people as insignificant without any sign of stress. KSM did not need to be waterboarded in violation of the US code of military conduct, the Geneva Conventions and the United Nations Convention on Torture in order for him to have made that mistake. He could just as well have made it—and was every bit as likely to have made it—over cookies and tea, or whatever goodies he preferred.

It should be added that KSM was identified as the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks by Abu Zubaydah, a close associate of OBL who was wounded and captured in March 2002. Two agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)—Ali Soufan and Steve Gaudin—got first crack at him at a CIA black site in Thailand. They cared for his wounds, showed him respect and immediately obtained that significant piece of actionable intelligence. In the previous year Soufan, an American Muslim who speaks Arabic, investigated the bombing of the USS Cole and persuaded a captured conspirator named Quso to confirm the operation's link to al-Qaeda. Remaining in Yemen after the attacks of 9/11, Soufan interrogated OBL's former bodyguard, Abu Jandal, also held by the Yemenis. From him he got confirmation that al-Qaeda was behind the attacks, information absolutely vital to the US military response. He read Abu Jandal his Miranda rights every day and yet got a hundred pages of fresh information on the al-Qaeda organization.[\[7\]](#)

Soufan is opposed to the use of torture for practical reasons: he is convinced by his own experience that it does not work. The CIA removed Soufan and Gaudin from the Abu Zubayda case and then applied their own techniques, turning Zubayda into a gibbering, masturbating psychotic, like a stressed-out monkey in a cage. As for the large, imposing and hostile Jandal, apparently trained in counter-interrogation techniques, Soufan played on his ego, gave him a history of America in Arabic to read, debated with him over the correct interpretation of the Koran and offered him sugar-free cookies, since

he was diabetic. The phrase “cookies, not torture” has become a sort of slogan for the non-coercive interrogation, as can be seen in articles and blogs on the web. Soufan relates the full story in his recently published memoir, [\*The Black Banners\*](#), which will be reviewed in *Washington Decoded* separately.<sup>[8]</sup>

If the object was to strike back at KSM and punish him for 9/11, then 183 near-drownings were too few for the advocates of torture, and he should have been executed on prime-time TV. But if the object was to get “actionable intelligence” out of him, as the Bush administration repeatedly insisted, then he should have been kept warm and dry, allowed to wear clothes and to eat and to go to the bathroom, and treated with respect, whether or not anyone thought he deserved it. And, of course, he should have been introduced to his new friend, the person who would take good care of him—his interrogator. Or, as the interrogators like to call themselves, the “gator.”

Such was not to be. The assumption of the Bush team, both the former president and the former officials who came out in force to defend the EIT program after the death of OBL, was that a hardened Muslim jihadist could not be reached by human contact. He had to be brought under control by force, pain and exhaustion. He had to be “broken” by “special” techniques, because the standard method of interrogation was too soft and too slow. This rule applied not only to a high-value detainee like KSM, fingered for a \$25 million reward, but also to hundreds of unknown suspects turned over to US authorities by Afghani and Pakistani allies for a \$3000-\$5000 bounty. And also to hundreds of Iraqi suspects rounded up by US occupation forces and processed at Abu Ghraib prison.<sup>[9]</sup>

### The Good Gators

The case for the good interrogation has yet to win the hearts and minds of the American public. As the nation continues to cope with the aftermath of 9/11, advocates of coercive interrogation maintain that any other form of prisoner treatment is a species of faintheartedness and unpatriotic sniveling. “When we get people who are more concerned about reading the rights to an al-Qaeda terrorist,” complained Dick Cheney, “than they are with protecting the United States against people who are absolutely committed to do anything they can to kill Americans, then I worry.” Defending the nation, he went on in an interview of 2009, is “a tough, mean, dirty, nasty business. These are evil people. And we’re not going to win this fight by turning the other cheek.”<sup>[10]</sup>

The statement reveals not only Cheney’s usual contempt for, and distortion of, any point of view contrary to his own, but also his usual ignorance of the way intelligence works. It is not necessary to get “tough, mean, dirty and nasty” when dealing with “evil people.” It is necessary, first, to stay cool, to determine who among the suspects actually are evil people, and then to get tough, but not mean, dirty and nasty. The trick is to use intelligence—intelligence in the original sense of the word—to outwit the enemy while yet remaining humane.

[Matthew Alexander](#) is a calm and collected fellow who for the past several years has been making the argument in America for non-coercive interrogation. He has written articles and books on the subject, lectured and appeared often on TV. An eighteen-year veteran of the Air Force (USAF) and USAF Reserves, he fought in Bosnia, Kosovo and Iraq. His first tour of duty in Iraq was in 2003; in 2006 he was picked to go back with a newly assembled team of interrogators. Since then, he has conducted more than 300 interrogations and supervised a thousand more. Not just a theoretician of the art, but a practitioner who received the Bronze Star for his service, he was [hushed up](#) by Sean Hannity on the latter's television show, because Hannity thought he knew best. A few months later, Ann Coulter belittled him on the Hannity show, saying that she didn't think the USAF even had interrogators.[\[11\]](#)

Alexander's name is a pseudonym, for reasons undisclosed. His face is clean-shaven, deadpan, even expressionless, perhaps as a tool of his trade. His manner is mild, or extremely restrained, perhaps for the same reason. Yet when he speaks on the subject of interrogation, he reveals a burning passion. To him, the creation of the EIT program betrays a distrust of the professional interrogator. Why would he need to "enhance" a winning technique with physical coercion?—he asks in every interview. The US Army infantry does not ask to use chemical weapons when it encounters resistance, and gators do not need to use illicit means of persuasion when someone resists their approach. He takes the term "enhanced interrogation techniques" as an insult.

Alexander's two books take the reader back to the troubled year of 2006, two years after the photographs of prisoner abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison had circulated around the world and discredited the coercive method of interrogation. Not only did this method, which sought by control and humiliation to "break" the prisoner, develop into a nightmare of prisoner abuse and a public-relations disaster—it also brought in little good intelligence and provided al-Qaeda with highly effective propaganda for recruitment. Alexander and his team were commissioned to try a new way—one that could obtain actionable intelligence without resorting to torture. Their assignment in Baghdad in March 2006 was to find Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Since Alexander and the other members of his team had experience in criminal investigation, they were put through an accelerated six-week course in military interrogation at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, and flown to Iraq on loan from the USAF to the US Army, which was stretched thin between wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the time of their arrival, the hunt for al-Zarqawi had gone on for three years, there was a \$10 million reward on his head and the Army had no leads.

If ever there was an evil person on earth, that person was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Possibly he had a theoretical motive for his actions—to drive the infidel out of the Middle East and create an Islamic caliphate—but the main thing he did with his life was kill as many people as he could. After failed attempts to bring down the monarchy in Jordan (his birthplace), he set up al-Qaeda operations inside Iraq, possibly prior to the US invasion of March 2003. Once Saddam Hussein was deposed and his Republican Guard disbanded, al-Zarqawi launched terrorist attacks on Americans, Jordanians, Europeans

and especially Shiite Iraqis. Bombings, executions, beheadings—all were justified by jihad, the “holy war.” In February 2006, the month before Alexander arrived, al-Zarqawi bombed the Shiite Golden Dome Mosque in Samara, precipitating all-out war between Shiites and Sunnis. Murder and mayhem spread through the land of Mesopotamia; bodies floated in the Tigris in such numbers that local mullahs prohibited the faithful from eating the fish. The larger mission for the interrogators, then, was not just to capture or kill one man, but to stop and roll back a civil war.

If ever there was a ticking time-bomb in real life, it was each day in Iraq that al-Zarqawi remained at large. The priority on catching him in 2006 was even higher than that for bin Laden. Yet Alexander did not resort to old-school methods of control when questioning prisoners thought to have information. He had to counter other interrogators who did want to use them. At the same time he had to push against bureaucratic obstacles and skirt around the rules to get access to a prisoner he considered the most promising. In his book, *How to Break a Terrorist: The U.S. Interrogators Who Used Brains, Not Brutality, To Take Down the Deadliest Man in Iraq* (2008), he calls this prisoner “Abu Haydar.”

Abu Haydar was large, bulky, well-educated and haughty. He claimed to be a photographer who had been hired to film a wedding. He was astonished, he said in perfect English with an upper-class British accent, to find foreigners—al-Qaeda—in the house to which he had been sent. Having stuck to this improbable story, resisted the control methods of two other interrogators and provided zero intelligence, he was slated to be shipped out to Abu Ghraib prison in six hours. Alexander seized these last hours as his window of opportunity.

Without prior authorization, he took Haydar to the interrogation room and began by saying that he had read a lot about him and had been dying to meet him. “The truth is that I am fascinated by your education in Islam.” Stroking the prisoner’s ego, he established rapport. After a few hours of talking about religion, he sold Haydar on the idea that he was needed by American intelligence to act as an advisor in the forthcoming war with Iran, which the United States was supposedly planning. Naturally, the plan was hush-hush. As a show of good faith, the prisoner was asked to give the name of someone important he knew. He produced Abu Ayyub al-Masri, the operations officer for al-Zarqawi—the equivalent position of KSM for OBL. This was a major breakthrough: no one had suspected that Abu Haydar had such high connections. Leaving the room, Alexander cancelled the prisoner’s transfer and went to a staff meeting to make a report.

Even then, another interrogator of the old school, who had come to the group from the US detention center in Guantánamo Bay and was favored by the top brass, took over the case and nearly broke the rapport. A couple of weeks later, Alexander managed to return to Haydar and reestablish their pact. Haydar told him that al-Masri was last known to be in Ramadi—not such a good piece of intelligence. (Al-Masri was killed four years later, in 2010.) Yet Haydar was still hooked on the idea of working with US intelligence. In subsequent sessions he gave up an imam named al-Rahman, who was al-Zarqawi’s

“spiritual advisor,” and he described his method of switching cars when driving to meet the head of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

On June 7, 2006, nearly five years before Navy SEAL Team 6 flew stealth Black Hawk helicopters from Jalalabad, Afghanistan, to the OBL compound in Abbottabad, a “surveillance asset” followed al-Rahman’s car from the Mansur neighborhood in Baghdad to a remote area outside of town. The car stopped at a farmhouse and the imam went inside, then the “asset” blasted it. A Special Forces (SF) helicopter swooped in and retrieved the wounded al-Zarqawi moments before he expired. The next morning President Bush made a statement in the Rose Garden, crediting the Special Forces “acting on tips in intelligence from Iraqis.” Snapshots of al-Zarqawi’s corpse were shown on American TV and on the internet. The news not reported at the time was that Alexander had persuaded “Abu Haydar,” a proud and defiant prisoner, a martial artist and specialist in the interpretation of the Koran, who nevertheless liked to read Harry Potter novels, to give up his good friend, the imam, who also died in the blast.[\[12\]](#)

*How to Break a Terrorist*, written in collaboration with John R. Bruning, narrates the hunt for al-Zarqawi. It details the mechanics of the operation, offers portraits of the Iraqis brought in for questioning and illustrates flexible, deceptive and deadly techniques of interrogation. The dialogues are recollected, and all the names of the participants, save al-Rahman and al-Zarqawi, are changed. The book was vetted by the Department of Defense before publication, and occasional lines are blacked out. Despite these limitations, the narrative is compelling and bears the stamp of authenticity. Anyone who thinks that non-coercive interrogation is too soft will find it very edifying.

The setting for operations is a military base to the north of Baghdad. The Air Force volunteers join an interrogation unit consisting of a commander, a senior interrogator, a senior analyst, a doctor, an administrator and an operations officer, plus a staff of analysts, interpreters and interrogators. Among the latter are some from the old school, either Army or Army contracted, including a woman and the nemesis mentioned above who came from a stint at Guantánamo. Alexander is named the senior interrogator, but the position is largely honorific, as it seems to carry no special weight with the others and only to bring him extra duties. He is one among many, and the unit strives to work as a team.

The gators work seven days a week from eleven in the morning to midnight, most often beginning early and ending late. They live in trailers. They wear civilian clothes so prisoners cannot guess their rank, and most of them grow beards. Their wretched office is called “the gator pit.” The interrogation booths are six-by-six plywood rooms with plastic chairs. There are three of them, all equipped with hidden microphones and cameras. Terrorist suspects are brought into the base by the SF, put in orange jumpsuits and kept in holding cells. They are interrogated by one man or two, with an interpreter of Arabic to the side. One of the “terps” (a Kurd) not only translates their words but also mimics their intonations. The sessions can be watched in the “Hollywood room” on flat-screen TV monitors. Each session is analyzed by the team, so that many brains are brought to bear on each suspect. When the gators are done with them, the prisoners are routinely sent on

to Abu Ghraib. What the gators learn from them generates new operations. New prisoners are constantly passing through. The idea is to move up through the ranks to the top of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The first terrorists seen in the book are two imams who bless suicide bombers before they go out to blow themselves up. They belong to the religious wing of al-Qaeda, which operates out of mosques and handles recruiting and financing. The other wing is the operational, which plans and carries out the attacks. Alexander calls the first imam “Abu Ali,” and his portrait is instructive and moving.

Abu Ali, gaunt and staring, does not conceal his hatred of Americans. Asked what he would do if handed a knife, he tells Alexander he would slit his throat and watch him die. Why? Because the Americans have taken everything from him and ruined his country. The son of a Sunni father and Shiite mother who converted to Sunni for the marriage, he grew up happy and successful. He owned a clothing store when the Americans invaded Iraq and drove the Sunnis out of power, leaving Shiite militias—death squads—to roam the neighborhoods killing Sunnis. They killed a friend of his. At his store he received an ultimatum from the Badr Corps: Pack up and leave in 48 hours. He took his family to his childhood hometown, Yusufiyah. But there, too, the Sunnis were under siege, the Americans did not protect them and no one would defend them but the foreigners—al-Qaeda. He allowed himself to be recruited in order to get weapons and protect his family. They took him to a house in the country to bless some men—at first he didn’t know why. Then he preached in the mosque of his childhood: Join al-Qaeda in the struggle, or the Americans will let the Shiites destroy you! Suicide bombers, he told Alexander and his fellow interrogator “Bobby,” were his only defense.

From this extremely hostile opening, Alexander broke Ali down. Did he really want al-Qaeda for his country? Did he not want the Americans to help him in his present situation? Surely he would have to be tried by the Iraqi government tribunal; if he helped them, they could put in a good word. Did he not want them to help his family? They could look out for them while he was in prison. When Ali spat out that they could do nothing, Alexander countered: Who else could? Leaving Abu Ali to ponder these questions, the interrogators turned to the second terrorist, Ali’s childhood friend.

“Zaydan” had a similar story and similar motives. However, he was chubby and jovial, and well-disposed toward the Americans. All the same, he would not betray al-Qaeda because of its terrible vengeance. Power drills were turned on the legs and heads of people who informed. Alexander and Bobby were not daunted. The presence of two prisoners who knew about each other gave them the opportunity to employ the technique known in every American police station as “the prisoner’s dilemma.” One prisoner does not know what the other is saying, does not know what deal the other may be making. Interrogators play on this dilemma, misleading both prisoners and extracting admissions from them.

By a combination of such techniques—Love of Family, Love of Country, We Understand, We Want to Help, Picture the Future, We Have Clout, We Can Put in a

Good Word, Prisoner's Dilemma—interrogators draw secrets out of their outmaneuvered subjects. For Zaydan, the turning point is the argument: Help us to drive the foreigners out of Iraq; we are here to fight al-Qaeda! (The reverse was the truth: al-Qaeda was in Iraq to fight the Americans.) For Abu Ali: Yes, you are right. We made big mistakes. Help us to do things right and make a better world for your son Ali. Each imam gives up the location of an al-Qaeda safe house, and each, by an odd turn of circumstance, learns that a friend was blown up in the house he indicated on a map. Both are devastated by the news before they are shipped off to Abu Ghraib.

There are about a dozen more cases in the book, each with a gripping story and a series of dialogues illustrating what has been called “the dark art of interrogation.” Building rapport is not really befriending. The gator not only shows respect and offers to help, but watches his subject, observing his body language, catching his “tells”—those little signs such as squints, the tapping of feet—that give away his emotions. And he listens. When a prisoner has a younger brother, so does the gator. When a prisoner has marital problems, the gator has had his share. The gator becomes an actor, a trickster, shifting shapes, assuming a new personality. Alexander can feel it coming on and taking over his mind and body. It's his double—his Doppelgänger.[\[13\]](#)

At a certain point the Doppelgänger has to assume a new role—the salesman. He has to make the pitch and close the deal. You know we can't let you go, but we can help your family. We know how tough it's been, but we can make it easier. We'll put in a good word for you, we'll see that money is sent where you want. But you have to give us something to show your good faith. Don't lie to us—it will kill the deal. We already know everything. Just tell us what you know... And then the long silence. The gator waits it out, like his namesake barely submerged at the edge of a watering hole. The prisoner finally speaks—he's sunk.

Alexander's second book, written without a collaborator, is *Kill or Capture: How a Special Operations Task Force Took Down a Notorious Al Qaeda Terrorist* (2011). The two books may be read one after the other, because the first covers the hunt for al-Zarqawi from March to June 2006 and the second—the hunt for Zafar, the head of al-Qaeda in northern Iraq, from May to July of the same year. The two books have the same form, though the second is more streamlined and reads faster. It illustrates the same rapport-building techniques as the first, yet reveals a few new tricks.

For the Zafar mission, Alexander joins an MIT—a mobile interrogation team—in Kirkuk. He goes out with the Special Forces in a Stryker personnel carrier on kill-or-capture operations. Every episode begins the same way. The Stryker rumbles through a residential neighborhood at night trying not to set off Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). When it comes to a stop, the SF men, using night vision, run ahead, blow down a door, stomp over the broken glass, catch and flexi-cuff everyone in the house, sit the men down in the living room and sequester the women and children in another room. Then they call for the MIT.

As often as not, it's the wrong house. Alexander has the task of determining who is who, and also who is the neighbor who should have been caught. His sensitivity here is paramount: you can't leave people behind who hate Americans for breaking and entering and terrorizing the family. He addresses each suspect properly: *As-salamu alaykum*. He apologizes for the mistake, assures the person that he or she will not be hurt. He finds funds at the base and pays reparations.

However, he also plays the prisoner's dilemma with the adults in different rooms. He feels queasy about getting children to betray their parents, yet in one instance persuades a father to permit his son to tell the truth. In another, he encourages a father to bring his son in for questioning, misleading him into thinking that the son will at once be released. The father howls with sudden understanding as the youth is seized and led away to a truck. Then, under interrogation, the son is told to honor his father, who brought him in, and trust the Americans. After he refuses to give information, fearing that al-Qaeda will retaliate against his family, he's sent to the "main facility."

The most amazing thing about the book is the way Alexander turns the cultural norms of the people to his own advantage. Even after the SF have smashed into someone's home and turned everything upside down in search of weapons, he can tell the head of the household: All right, I've shown you respect. I've been fair to you; now don't you disrespect me and lie about your brother. And it works! It's a magnified version of the social compunction whereby we tolerate telemarketers who interrupt our supper with the irritating pitch: "How are you tonight?" And instead of cursing, we usually answer: "Fine."

The two books are not literary masterpieces. For that, one has to go to *Fear Up Harsh: An Army Interrogator's Dark Journey Through Iraq* by Tony Lagouranis and Allen Mikaelian (2007), which condemns EITs from the perspective of someone who was drawn into using them and suffered remorse. But in their streamlined way Alexander's books are exciting primers on the dynamics of an effective interrogation. The prisoner, like any human being, always wants something, even when facing death. And so, like everyone else, he is vulnerable to persuasion. Reduced in every capacity, always under stress, even if made to feel physically comfortable, he is no match for the gator.

In short, the good interrogation is not a walk in the park. True, the prisoners are not battered, not tortured, not threatened—at least not directly. All the rules of Geneva and the US Army Field Manual are observed. Yet the prisoners are gutted of their tightly held secrets and persuaded to give up friends and relatives who are at once either captured or killed. Whether this is wholly humane or not is debatable. What is not debatable is that those interrogated produce actionable intelligence, whatever the cost to themselves and their loved ones. In some cases they are converted, or partly converted, to the view of the other side. (Abu Jandal is an instance.) In most cases they are deceived, or partly deceived, with promises of exceptional treatment (Abu Haydar). One way or the other, they are outwitted, used up and moved out.

Their fate in Iraq is usually dreadful. The promises made to them may or may not be honored, depending on whether their interrogator finds it possible or deems it fit. He becomes, in a sense, their judge and jury, feeling sympathy for their predicament in a lawless country and killing zone, yet never excusing their solution of joining the terrorists. He sends them off with vain hopes to Abu Ghraib, where they will be processed and brought before a tribunal consisting of an American, an Iraqi Sunni and an Iraqi Shiite.

Although they may have only blessed men, or photographed them, and not armed them, they are terrorist collaborators and will be sentenced to death. They will swing from a rope, perhaps thinking like Abu Ali that when the US invaded their country the whole world turned against him; perhaps imagining like the electrician “Abu Gamal,” who wired suicide vests, that at least his love letter will be sent to his wife. In Alexander’s account, when a promise is given, an effort is usually made. Yet sometimes a promise is given knowing that any effort is futile. In Gamal’s case, Alexander threw the love letter away, thinking it too little to humanize a man who helped young men to blow themselves up.

The good interrogator is tough. He has to be tough to turn human fates. He has to be tough to live with the picture in his mind of the little girl who was killed in the farmhouse outside of Baghdad. He has to convince himself that she died for the greater good, as a sacrifice for those citizens who survive her in the new and uncertain Iraq.

### Washington & Oslo

Alexander’s experience in 2006 has relevance for counterterrorism policy today. The hunt for bin Laden was officially a kill-or-capture mission, but the emphasis on the first option far outweighed the second. Had OBL immediately surrendered and thrown up his hands, Panetta told Brian Williams, he might have saved his life. As it happened, one of his wives, unarmed, jumped in front of him, was shot in the leg and fell out of the way. OBL, unarmed and unshielded, received in rapid succession a bullet to the chest and a bullet to the head. He fell back dead. This sequence demonstrates that he could have been wounded like his wife, or simply grabbed by much stronger men and taken into custody, but that was not the plan. One television special narrated: “Although members of the national security team say there’s a remote chance bin Laden can be captured alive, official sources say it’s an all-out kill mission.”[\[14\]](#)

Spokespersons for the Obama administration have since exulted over the trove of information gathered from OBL’s computers and notebooks, which were taken from the compound along with his dead body. Nothing is said about the intelligence that the founder and leader of al-Qaeda carried in his head. Top-secret operations, as we know, are often transmitted “by word of mouth only.” Could OBL not have explained details in the hard drives and papers? Evidently the chore of holding him, interrogating him, trying him and carrying out the verdict would have presented so many problems for the Obama

administration in the present political context that the president, who gave the go-ahead on the morning of April 29, found it easier to blow him away.

Such a decision reduces the value of intelligence and counterterrorism in the battle against al-Qaeda. Osama bin Laden was not a foot soldier and not merely a high-level operative: he was the head of the whole bloody al-Qaeda organization. Had the mission truly been kill or capture, then once he was cornered and exposed, he should have been grabbed, flexi-cuffed and hooded the same as thousands of others, then flown out and held in captivity. No one can doubt that he would have loved to tell his captors why they were wrong and he was right. An experienced interrogator could have exploited his pride and dreams of glory. The chances for using his captivity to influence his successors and potential followers were enormous. Yet by the same token no one can doubt that his detention in Guantánamo or at an undisclosed site would have lit up a firestorm of political controversy in America over each and every detail of his incarceration. Advocates of torture would have been screaming for EITs and revenge. Had he been given a book to read or been allowed to walk in an exercise yard, the charges of soft treatment and mollycoddling would have been deafening. If we assume that the Department of Justice could not have handled such a prisoner, and he was better blown away, then we have lost faith in another branch of government.

President Obama told the Nobel Prize committee in Oslo on 10 December 2009:

Where force is necessary, we have a moral and strategic interest in binding ourselves to certain rules of conduct. And even as we confront a vicious adversary that abides by no rules, I believe the United States of America must remain a standard bearer in the conduct of war. That is what makes us different from those whom we fight. That is a source of our strength. That is why I prohibited torture. That is why I ordered the prison at Guantánamo Bay closed. And that is why I have reaffirmed America's commitment to abide by the Geneva Conventions. We lose ourselves when we compromise the very ideals that we fight to defend. And we honor those ideals by upholding them not when it's easy, but when it is hard.[\[15\]](#)

Now he knows how hard it is. The execution of bin Laden suggests that US intelligence has downgraded the role of interrogation as a chief source of information, the other chief sources being Humint (human intelligence) and Sigint (signals intelligence). The easiest tactic today for dealing with terrorists, both of high rank and low, is to assassinate them, witness the greatly expanded program of predator drones with hit lists. After OBL, targeted killings have rolled on at a furious pace. In September, Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan, both American citizens and members of the Yemen-based Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), were assassinated. In October a drone killed al-Awlaki's sixteen-year-old son, born in Denver. No due legal process for these American citizens seems to have taken place.[\[16\]](#)

Two days after the OBL killing, Matthew Alexander was asked for his opinion of the affair. Already by this time Karl Rove and Donald Rumsfeld had weighed in on TV and credited the EIT program, and New York Congressman Peter King had stated flatly (and falsely) on CBS News that: “Osama bin Laden would not have been captured and killed if it were not for the initial information we got from Khalid Sheikh Mohammed after he was waterboarded.”[\[17\]](#)

Alexander responded with an observation that seemed obvious only after he had made it. KSM, he said with his usual flat affect, must have known not only the nickname, but also the true name of OBL’s courier, and if not, then at least a way to reach him. Yet he gave neither the one, nor the other, nor the other, despite all the waterboarding and subsequent years of supposed cooperative behavior. To have such a high-value detainee, scoffed Alexander, and to get so little out of him in eight years that could be used to find the leader does not credit the EIT program, but rather discredits it. “By any standard of interrogation,” he concluded, it was a dismal failure.[\[18\]](#)

Likewise Ali Soufan notes in his book that KSM not only knew the courier—al-Kuwaiti was his protégé. Soufan names four other al-Qaeda detainees who knew al-Kuwaiti, and all were subjected to EITs without revealing what they knew. He names a Pakistani al-Qaeda operative, Hassan Ghul, who told the CIA in 2004 about the courier before he was subjected to coercive interrogation. Years were wasted on EITs, concludes Ali Soufan.[\[19\]](#)

Soufan and Alexander’s debunking of the torture advocates is especially valuable today, when the present administration repeatedly gives signs of hedging on its commitment to American principles and international rules of war. At his confirmation hearing in June this year, General David Petraeus, the new director of the CIA, told the Senate Intelligence Committee that standard methods of interrogation were adequate for use on most detainees, but Congress should consider something “more than normal techniques” for special cases.

Here he presented a ticking time-bomb scenario straight out of the TV action series *24*. Suppose, he said, you had a detainee who knew how to disarm a nuclear device timed to go off under the Empire State building. Extraordinary measures might be required to make him talk in time, warned Petraeus, and Congress might want to give the president the option of using them. Amazingly, John McCain, who sits on the committee, agreed: Yes, the president of the United States should be the one to decide. McCain and Petraeus are both on record as being opposed to torture, yet both endorsed a far-fetched scenario as a reasonable exception.[\[20\]](#)

Can you really stop a person from giving false information? More specifically, can you stop a bomb expert ready to die for the cause from blowing himself up—and Manhattan with him—when allowed after torture to defuse the bomb? Or can you trust him to give truthful information over the phone to a bomb squad at the site, even while he is in the grip of torture? Anyone can think of a half-dozen ways the bomb expert in this scenario

could foil the “extraordinary methods,” such as advising they cut the green wire, not the yellow.

That the battle-hardened General Petraeus would produce such a puzzle is unsettling. Why a ticking time-bomb? Why now? Did he want to open a loophole for less fictional situations? At the hearing he made the whole thing sound academic, or a concern for others, because, as he reminded the committee, the CIA no longer holds or interrogates detainees. Which is true, though not entirely.[\[21\]](#)

In August 2009, President Obama established the High-Value Detainee Interrogation Group (HIG). This group combines the expertise and select personnel of the CIA, FBI, Department of Defense (DOD) and other agencies to handle high-value detainees on a case-by-case basis. Initial statements from the White House emphasized that the CIA would still be involved in interrogations, though now as part of an elite team. HIG is based in the FBI, directed by the National Security Council and bound to the procedures and principles enunciated in the US Army Field Manual. It was reported to be training a special unit to interrogate OBL in the event of his capture, and the unit was thought to be waiting during the Navy SEAL operation on May 1, but then was not needed.[\[22\]](#)

The latest Counterinsurgency Field Manual, FM 3-24, edited by General Petraeus and General James Mattis of the Marine Corps, was published in December 2006. It states unequivocally:

Torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment is never a morally permissible option, even if lives depend on gaining information. No exceptional circumstances permit the use of torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. (Section 7-42)

So why the new chief of the CIA, who will have a voice in HIG policy, spun a ticking-bomb scenario before Congress is open to speculation. His proposal, however, makes one thing clear: the US debate on torture today concerns, among other things, what happens inside the HIG. The HIG has a good press and professes a firm commitment to non-coercive, rapport-building techniques, but it operates in secret and very little of its actual practice has come to light.

Moreover, FM 3-24 is not a guarantee against torture. The passage from this manual cited above concludes with the statement that “FM 2-22.3 provides the authoritative doctrine and policy for interrogation.” This latter field manual, FM 2-22.3, was published three months prior to FM 3-24; it has an Appendix M entitled “Restricted Interrogation Technique—Separation.” The “separation” means that “unlawful enemy combatants” not covered by the Geneva Conventions can, with proper approval, be isolated from other prisoners and subjected to special enhanced techniques. It looks like an escape hatch back to Bush.[\[23\]](#)

Possibly Petraeus wanted to make this exception more explicit. In any event, Senator Kelly Ayotte (R-NH) acted in the same spirit this past November when, together with

Senators Saxby Chambliss (R-GA), John Cornyn (R-TX) and Lindsey Graham (R-SC), she put forward an amendment to the DOD authorization bill that would add a classified section to the Army Field Manual authorizing secret interrogation techniques. Her stated purpose was to keep these techniques from being posted on the web where future detainees could read and prepare for them. Early in December, the amendment was apparently withdrawn for further consideration, but the initiative indicates the lay of the land.[\[24\]](#)

As for the US Army, it officially is no longer engaged in combat in Iraq, and since July 2011 it has no military contractors serving as interrogators. However, US military field reports released by WikiLeaks in October 2010 reveal that detainees turned over to Iraqi security between the years 2005-2009 were routinely beaten and tortured. Burning, electrical shocking, sexual abuse and killing occurred. US officials either ignored the abuse or wrote reports that went nowhere. So the prospect for humane interrogations in Iraq after the Americans leave is not promising.[\[25\]](#)

The US Army remains officially at war in Afghanistan. A United Nations report released in October this year paints a similarly distressing picture of what happens to detainees turned over to Afghani security. Following the report, transfers of American-held captives to sixteen prisons were suspended, pending investigation and improvement of the facilities. The transfer of a prisoner to a country or institution engaged in torture is a violation of the United Nations Convention Against Torture.[\[26\]](#)

All told, torture remains a central problem in the continuing war on terror. The counterterrorism policy that has emerged under President Obama seems designed to avoid torture—and interrogation itself—by substituting assassination. Yet the kill-or-capture missions, which executed bin Laden, al-Awlaki, his son and many less prominent figures, and which operate in a half-dozen countries today, also kill a lot of unintended men, women and children, people not entered on the lists. Officials still designate such accidents “collateral damage.”

In his response to bin Laden’s execution, Alexander reminded TV viewers that the way to win the war on terror is not only to stop terrorists and terrorist attacks. They will go on forever unless a way can be found to stop terrorist recruitments. Perhaps he was mindful of the fact that the killing of al-Zarqawi did not stop the carnage in Iraq; the suicide bombings actually increased. Six months later President Bush began the deployment of an additional 28,000 troops to Iraq, after which the daily attacks on US forces continued to rise.

If you kill a terrorist and someone replaces him because he is inspired by the cause, then the organization renews itself. Torture of prisoners renews the cause and renews the recruitments. Alexander reports in every interview that most of the al-Qaeda terrorists he interrogated—the foreigners who came to Iraq—told him they joined because of US torture. General Petraeus has said the same thing. Summary executions with collateral damage in a half-dozen countries, leaving clumps of mangled bodies and people crying in the streets, will have the same effect.[\[27\]](#)

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[1] Jane Mayer, "[Bin Laden Dead, Torture Debate Lives On](#)," *New Yorker*, 2 May 2011; Catherine Herridge, "[Bush-Era Interrogations Provided Key Details on Bin Laden's Location](#)," FoxNews.com, 3 May 2011; Scott Shane and Charlie Savage, "[Bin Laden Raid Revives Debate on Value of Torture](#)," *New York Times*, 3 May 2011.

[2] Michael B. Mukasey, "[The Waterboarding Trail to bin Laden](#)," *Wall Street Journal*, 6 May 2011. This article is an angry brief for a return to CIA torture. Virtually every statement in it is false and dishonest.

[3] Cold War sources of EIT: Scott Shane, David Johnston and James Risen, "[Secret U.S. Endorsement of Severe Interrogations](#)," *New York Times*, 4 October 2007; Philippe Sands, *The Torture Team: Rumsfeld's Memo and the Betrayal of American Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 47, 61, 127; Jane Mayer, *The Dark Side* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), 157-164; David P. Forsythe, *The Politics of Prisoner Abuse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 15-17.

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[5] "Intelligence gathered from waterboarded detainees was used to track down al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, CIA Chief Leon Panetta told NBC News on Tuesday," [msnbc.com](#), 3 May 2011.

[6] The basic facts are that the CIA picked up al-Kuwaiti's track in August 2010 when he made a call to someone under technical surveillance. Then he was followed on the ground from Peshawar (where KSM reportedly said he was) to Abbottabad and the OBL compound. The compound was put under satellite, drone, and then on-the-ground surveillance. See "[Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti](#)" on Wikipedia; Discovery Channel, [Killing Bin Laden](#), May 2011; History Channel, [Targeting bin Laden](#), September 2011

[7] On Ali Soufan: Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 404-413; Mayer, *Dark Side*, 155-157. KSM freely admitted in an interview with Al Jazeera in April 2002 that he had headed the "Holy Tuesday" operation. Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of Its Enemies Since 9/11* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 102-104.

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[8] Wright, *Looming Tower*, 410-413; Mayer, *Dark Side*, chap. 7, esp. 165-179; “[The Interrogator: A Conversation with Ali Soufan](#),” *Frontline*, 13 September 2011.

[9] Premises of the EITs: see Philippe Sands, *Torture Team*, chaps. 3 and 6; Mayer, *Dark Side*, 79-87, 143, 156-164.

[10] John F. Harris et al., “[Cheney Warns of New Attacks](#),” *Politico*, 4 February 2009. A public-opinion poll taken by the Pew Research Center on the tenth anniversary of 9/11 found that people who thought that torture could be justified in the war on terror rose from 43 percent to 53 percent in the ten years: Jim Lobe, “[US: Poll Tracks Shifts in Public Attitudes Since 9/11](#),” *Global Issues*, 1 September 2011.

[11] Matthew Alexander, “[Ann Coulter Insults Me and Hundreds of Combat Veterans](#),” *Huffington Post*, 3 May 2009.

[12] President Bush, “[Death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi](#),” 8 June 2006.

[13] See Mark Bowden, “[The Dark Art of Interrogation](#),” *The Atlantic*, October 2003. The History Channel documentary and DVD of the same title (2005) begins with a strong advocacy of old-fashioned coercive interrogation, but toward the end shows its flaws and seems to contradict itself.

[14] Discovery Channel, [Killing Bin Laden](#), May 2011 .

[15] Barack Obama, [Nobel Lecture](#), 10 December 2009.

[16] Tara McKelvey, “[A Look Inside Obama’s Predator Drone Killing Machine](#),” *Newsweek*, 16 February 2011; Stephen Grey and Dan Edge, “[Kill/Capture](#),” *Frontline*, 10 May 2011; Mark Mazzetti, et al., “[Two-Year Manhunt Led to Awlaki Death](#),” *New York Times*, 30 September 2011; Glenn Greenwald, “[The Due-Process-Free Assassination of US Citizens Is Now Reality](#),” *Salon*, 30 September 2011; latest series of US assassinations shown on: “[Rachel Maddow Questions Legality Of Anwar al-Awlaki Killing](#),” *Huffington Post*, 1 October 2011; Peter Finn and Greg Miller, “[Anwar al-Awlaki’s Family Speaks Out Against His Son’s Death in Airstrike](#),” *Washington Post*, 17 October 2011.

[17] “[Rep. King: Waterboarded Khalid Sheikh Mohammed Gave Up Bin Laden’s Courier. Long Island Rep. Says Controversial Interrogation Was Key](#),” CBS New York, 3 May 2011.

[18] [Matthew Alexander interview](#) on “Democracy Now!” with Amy Goodman, 4 May 2011.

[19] Ali Soufan, *The Black Banners: The Inside Story of 9/11 and the War Against al-Qaeda* (New York: Norton, 2011), 535-536. According to a US military document published by WikiLeaks, al-Kuwaiti was KSM’s subordinate and worked with him in an

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[22] Anne E. Kornblut, "[New Unit to Question Key Terror Suspects: Move Shifts Interrogation Oversight From the CIA to the White House,](#)" *Washington Post*, 24 August 2009; Marc Ambinder, "[FBI's High-level Interrogation Group Is Up And Running,](#)" *The Atlantic*, 6 February 2006; Mark Benjamin, "[Special Group Quietly Assists in Terrorist Interrogations Under Obama,](#)" *Time*, 16 May 2011.

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