

# Uncrucify Them: An Exercise of the Imagination

by Mark Chmiel and Andrew Wimmer

This weekend thousands of people are gathering at Fort Benning, Georgia, to demonstrate their continued opposition to the “School of Assassins,” a school that has been training Latin America’s military in the techniques of torture and terror for more than fifty years. Each November a protest and solemn funeral procession are held around the anniversary of the 1989 assassination of six Salvadoran Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter at the University of Central America (UCA) in San Salvador. The soldiers responsible for their murders were among the elite forces who trained at Fort Benning’s School of the Americas.

Ignacio Ellacuría, the Jesuit priest and rector of the UCA, may have been predicting his own slaying when he wrote that if the university were to make a clear, strong stand for justice, it would suffer persecution. And so it did. Yet his focus was not on what would happen to the privileged Jesuits at the university, but what was already happening to the majority of Salvadorans living in inhuman poverty.

Ellacuría once proposed an exercise of the imagination for this present age of atrocity; an exercise that calls people of good will to step outside their own comfort so that others might simply live:

I want you to set your eyes and your hearts on these people who are suffering so much—some from poverty and hunger, others from oppression and repression. Then, standing before this people thus crucified you must repeat St. Ignatius’ examination from the first week of the [Spiritual] Exercises.

Ask yourselves: What have I done to crucify them? What do I do to uncrucify them? What must I do for this people to rise again?

Now, these many years later, Ellacuría’s questions carry a new urgency for all of us mired in the global “war on terror.” Indeed, we can look in many directions and see people suffering so much from the results of U.S. foreign and domestic policy. We need only turn our gaze toward

Fallujah and Ramadi, the pulverized cities of Iraq, once cities of thousands, now shells, their populations scattered to makeshift desert dwellings and refugee camps. How did we contribute—by our taxes, our silence, our timidity—to their crucifixion?



We at the Center for Theology and Social Analysis in Saint Louis, Missouri, have been especially horrified by one particular expression of contemporary “crucifixion,” the brazen use of torture as an instrument of U.S. policy. From Bagram Prison in Afghanistan, to Abu Ghraib in Iraq and Guantánamo in Cuba, the U.S. has scandalized the world with the sickening disparity between our official rhetoric about “liberation” and “democracy” and our operative practices of abuse, humiliation, and torture.

Lest you think crucifixion is merely an antiquated metaphor, consider the story of Manadel al-Jamadi. Taken prisoner in Baghdad by U. S. Navy Seals, witnesses said he arrived at Abu Ghraib alive, but after a short period of “interrogation” during which his arms were wrenched behind his back and his body hoisted by his wrists into a position known as “Palestinian hanging,” al-Jamadi was soon dead from asphyxiation.

Hannah Arendt instructed us long ago in the utter banality of evil, neatly laying bare the mechanisms of evil’s shockingly everyday quality. So it’s not just—or even primarily—the hands of Lynndie England, but the

senators, bureaucrats, military personnel, doctors, lawyers, private contractors, corporate heads, and pundits who all do their part to keep the gears of this U.S. torture machine turning. Evidently wanting to be rid of the terrorist threat once and for all, they are willing to accept “whatever works.” And so they line up in loyalty, from Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice dutifully parroting the mantra of “a different kind of war,” to our representatives who will not vote to “tie the president’s hands,” or White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan regurgitating his professions of American rectitude. George Bush himself taunts us all with his recent declaration in Argentina, “We do not torture.”

But we see the victims. What do we do to uncrucify them?



Every morning thousands of commuters head into Raleigh/Durham from the south, traveling along Route 70. Just north of Smithfield they pass the Johnston County Airport, where shielded only by a small grove of trees, Aero Contractors does its duty by participating in our government’s program of “extraordinary rendition.” Aero provides the pilots and planes so teams of CIA agents can snatch terror suspects and fly them to countries with known records of torture where the dirty work will be done for us, or directly to Guantánamo and other “black sites” where we will do it ourselves.

On Friday morning, a group of us (some from St. Louis, several Catholic Workers and others from Raleigh, and Kathy Kelly from Chicago) gathered outside the hangar that houses these CIA “torture taxis” to offer a Litany of Lament and Mourning. The Jewish prophets’ reliance

on “the language of grief,” writes Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, breaks open “the rhetoric that engages the community in mourning for a funeral they do not want to admit. It is indeed their own funeral.” One by one Friday morning we lamented the torment and death of victims of torture throughout the world while we mourned the death of our own souls as we learn more each day about our own complicity.

We lowered the American flag at Aero to half-staff as a sign of mourning and grief for the suffering caused by the oppression and repression that is U.S. policy.

We also willingly trespassed at Aero Contractors in order to read and present an indictment of Aero’s direct involvement in numerous violations of domestic and international law by its aiding and abetting the torture program of the Bush Administration.

While some of our group held signs and banners along the highway, others delivered copies of the indictment to county officials, calling on them to take action against Aero.

The vibrant movement to close the School of Assassins in Georgia has sought to shine a light on the nefarious U.S. practice of training in torture and terrorism against the Latin American people.

By our actions Friday in North Carolina, we hope to shine a light on what has become the U.S. reliance on torture across the globe. Let’s put our bodies before the wheels of the great machine that crushes Iraqis and Americans both, and to say, “No more!”

We urge you to engage in your own acts of mourning and resistance.

Go to Johnston County. Haunt Aero Contractors. Sit on the runway. Shine the light. Refuse to move.

No more crucifixion. No more rendition. No more torture.

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Go to [WWW.STOPTORTURENOW.ORG](http://WWW.STOPTORTURENOW.ORG) for video and audio accounts of the action.