Torture and Leadership Projects

This book has been largely about informal institutions, but, as the large N studies of torture show, the constraints imposed on polities by formal institutions matter. As mentioned earlier, work in what Davenport (2004) calls the domestic democratic peace tradition has consistently found that aspects of democracy have a negative effect on the incidence of repression by states. As Davenport (2007) points out, repression in democracies imposes costs and its benefits are doubtful in comparison to the alternatives. In democratic states rulers who use repressive measures can be removed or see their power diminished by elections. Citizens can remove their financial support for recalcitrant authorities as well. The institutional constraints in democracies—checks and balances, multiple veto points—can also make repression difficult to sustain. Finally, in democracies, ruling elites have many and better ways to deflect opposition into subsidiary issues and, in modern polities, have considerable resources available to influence public opinion (Davenport and Armstrong 2005). However, as might be expected in two polities with such disparate political frameworks as the United States and the Soviet Union, the fate of the leadership projects developed by their governments is and was quite different.

In retrospect, the degree of success of the leadership projects in the Soviet Union and the United States was not a result of political elites instigating torture to protect them. Indeed, the final results were quite different because of the influence of other events, largely separated from the torture practices of the three governments I have considered. However, as I will try to show below, those projects did have a substantial influence on how these new exogenous effects were perceived by both elites and mass publics. How the leadership project of the Stalinists succeeded and the immediate legacy of that success was determined by how the project developed in an already
authoritarian state and, further, how it worked to sustain the weakness of institutional constraints and the diminution of mechanisms of popular approval in the Soviet Union. How the leadership project of the Bush administration partially failed and the immediate legacy of that failure are, as already established research on democratic domestic peace would have predicted, largely a function of the development of democratic politics in the United States. The ultimate success of the project of the Polk administration and its subsequent failure to shield that administration from the consequences of its actions are also due largely to democratic constraints. But here, as I hope to show, the role of “secular time” and the failure of violent opposition to develop had a major role to play in how the Mexican War influenced the politics of the time.

**Torture and Its Aftermath: The Stalinist Terror and the War on Terror**

How dare they? How dare the incompetent and willful members of the Bush–Cheney administration humiliate our nation and our people in the eyes of the world and in the conscience of our own people? How dare they subject us to such dishonor and disgrace? How dare they drag the good name of the United States of America through the mud of Saddam Hussein’s torture prison?

— Al Gore, former vice president, speech at New York University (2004)

When you begin reading the newspapers, in particular *Pravda*, you automatically get upset that such a revolting and outrageous lie has been written, and who is this lie for? It’s for us, the Russian workers. Did Lenin, or Marx, ever teach the party to lie so outrageously, so shamelessly, without blushing? You commit acts of violence against workers and peasants. You scribblers, you’ve enslaved us worse than any tsar and you write impudently, you lie that you are for us workers. It’s time to drive you out, you vile creatures, so you won’t enslave the peasants in Lenin’s name.

— Excerpt from an anonymous letter to *Pravda* in 1930 (Siegelbaum and Sokolov 2000, 46–47)

The difference between the commentary made in Vice President Gore’s jeremiad against torture and its consequences for U.S. foreign policy and the letter to *Pravda* is obviously not very great in terms of the level of feeling expressed, but the effects of each are indicative of the institutional differences mentioned above. Gore’s speech, one of the most blistering critiques of a sitting administration ever given by an American politician, was delivered at the height of the 2004 presidential campaign before a packed auditorium at New York University. The speech was widely covered...