

# Book Note: Talking About Torture: How Political Discourse Shapes The Debate, by Jared Del Rosso

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## Book Note: Talking About Torture: How Political Discourse Shapes The Debate, by Jared Del Rosso

### **Abstract**

FOLLOWING THE SEPTEMBER 11 ATTACKS and the subsequent “War on Terror,” allegations of torture (or “enhanced interrogation”) sparked intense debates about the rights of the detainees, political accountability, and legality of actions. Today, it is taken for granted that the United States participated in the abuse of detainees at facilities. In *Talking About Torture: How Political Discourse Shapes the Debate* by Jared Del Rosso<sup>1</sup>, society’s acknowledgment of torture is not taken for granted. Instead, Del Rosso provides the reader with an analysis on how the discourse on torture in the US transitioned from denial of its existence to acknowledgment. The introductory chapter outlines the purpose of the book, the reason behind focusing on the discourse on torture rather than a direct study of the use of torture, methodology, and goals. In the first chapter, the author sets the foundation by proposing that “torture” is a cultural object associated with certain imagery and meaning. In the past, torture was once a “neutral word within the legal vocabulary”—today, it is a word “packed with moral meaning and humanitarian principles of human rights and inherent dignity.”<sup>2</sup>

## Book Note

***Talking About Torture: How Political Discourse Shapes The Debate*, by Jared Del Rosso**

HONGYI GENG

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The introductory chapter outlines the purpose of the book, the reason behind focusing on the discourse on torture rather than a direct study of the use of torture, methodology, and goals. In the first chapter, the author sets the foundation by proposing that “torture” is a cultural object associated with certain imagery and meaning. In the past, torture was once a “neutral word within the legal vocabulary”—today, it is a word “packed with moral meaning and humanitarian principles of human rights and inherent dignity.”<sup>2</sup>

In the following chapters, the author details chronologically the evolution of the torture issue in the US. Beginning in Chapter Two, the author contrasts the response following allegations of abuse at the Metropolitan Detention Center

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1. Jared Del Rosso, *Talking About Torture: How Political Discourse Shapes the Debate*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
  2. *Ibid* at 20.

(MDC) and Abu Ghraib prison. It is evident that after allegations of abuse at MDC were reported, the response was lethargic and characterized by denial. After Abu Ghraib, however, the political response was rapid and intense, with many high-profile officials competing to account for the abuses. The author argues that the juxtaposition in response stemmed from both the different forms of evidence capturing these events and the current socio-political context. Chapter Three is an examination of how the United States Congress, military officials, and investigators accounted for Abu Ghraib, and were able to leverage the developments in documentary record and geographic dimensions of political accounts to depict Abu Ghraib as an isolated incident. In Chapter Four, however, the author shows how proof of abuse at other sites such as Guantanamo Bay shattered the narrative of Abu Ghraib as an isolated incident. By Chapter Five, as more accounts of abuse at Guantanamo were released, the author conveys how the United States Supreme Court's ruling in *Hamsdan v Rumsfeld* and the 2006 midterm elections altered the debate on torture. This chapter captures how the disorder and excesses of Guantanamo drove the transformation of Guantanamo from a model prison to a global stain.

The author then shifts to the political discourse around the legality, effectiveness, and impact on human rights of a contentious issue—waterboarding. In Chapter Six, the author features arguments provided in support and opposition of the practice and argues that incompatible accounts exist because of the lack of definitive, official information on waterboarding.

The author wraps up the analysis in Chapter Seven by surveying the legacy of torture in the US. Because many documents remain classified and meaningful investigations have not been conducted, the debate on torture will remain unsettled. Most interestingly, the author incorporates discussion on the use of drones for counterterrorism. He draws parallels between the discourse legitimating enhanced interrogation and drone programs, and puts forth propositions challenging the acceptance of use of drones.

This book navigates readers through the past, present and future of the “torture issue” in the US. Using a constructionist approach to conduct a discourse analysis on relevant congressional hearings, the author provides commentary on the evidence and socio-political conditions. While most books on torture focus on the physical act, this book supplements them by highlighting the debate and what it reveals about US values on national security and civil liberties. As a result, readers are left with a fulsome picture of the contemporary meaning of torture in the US.