

Posted by Joan Russow
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By [Rebecca Gordon](#)

http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/176087/tomgram%3A_rebecca_gordon%2C_american_war_crimes%2C_yesterday%2C_today%2C_and_tomorrow/#moreThey're back!

From the look of the presidential campaign, war crimes are back on the American agenda. We really shouldn't be surprised, because American officials got away with it last time -- and in the case of the drone wars [continue](#) to get away with it today. Still, there's nothing like the heady combination of a "populist" Republican race for the presidency and a national hysteria over terrorism to make Americans want to reach for those "enhanced interrogation techniques." That, as critics have long argued, is what usually happens if war crimes aren't prosecuted.

In August 2014, when President Obama finally [admitted](#) that "we tortured some folks," he added a warning. The recent history of U.S. torture, he said, "needs to be understood and accepted. We have to as a country take responsibility for that so hopefully we don't do it again in the future." By pinning the responsibility for torture on all of us "as a country," Obama avoided holding any of the actual perpetrators to account.

Unfortunately, "hope" alone will not stymie a serial war criminal -- and the president did not even heed his own warning. For seven years his administration has done everything except help the country "take responsibility" for torture and other war crimes. It looked the other way when it comes to holding accountable those who set up and ran the CIA's large-scale torture operations at its " [black sites](#) " around the world. It never brought charges against [those who ordered torture](#) at Guantánamo. It prosecuted no one, above all not the top officials of the Bush administration.

Now, in the endless run-up to the 2016 presidential elections, we've been treated to some pretty strange [gladiatorial extravaganzas](#) , with more to come in 2016. In these peculiarly American spectacles, Republican candidates hurl themselves at one another in a frenzied effort to be seen as the candidate most likely to ignore the president's wan hope and instead "do it

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again in the future.” As a result, they are promising to commit a whole range of crimes, from torture to the slaughter of civilians, for which the leaders of some nations would find themselves hauled into international court as war criminals. But “war criminal” is a label reserved purely for people we loathe, not for us. To [paraphrase](#) former President Richard Nixon, if the United States does it, it’s not a crime.

In the wake of the brutal attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, the promises being openly made to commit future crimes have only grown more forthright. A few examples from the presidential campaign trail should suffice to make the point:

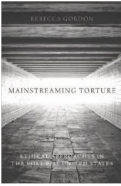
* Ted Cruz [guarantees](#) that “we” will “utterly destroy ISIS.” How will we do it? “We will [carpet bomb](#) them into oblivion” -- that is, “we” will saturate an area with munitions in such a way that everything and everyone on the ground is obliterated. Of such a bombing campaign against the Islamic State, he told a cheering crowd at the [Rising Tide Summit](#), “I don’t know if sand can glow in the dark, but we’re going to find out.” (It’s hard not to take this as a reference to the use of nuclear weapons, though in the bravado atmosphere of the present Republican campaign a lot of detailed thought is undoubtedly not going into any such proposals.)

* Kindly retired pediatric neurosurgeon Ben Carson evidently has similar thoughts. When [pressed](#) by CNN co-moderator Hugh Hewitt in the most recent Republican debate on whether he was “tough” enough to be “okay with the deaths of thousands of innocent children and civilian[s],” Carson replied, “You got it. You got it.” He even presented a future campaign against the Islamic State in which “thousands” of children might die as an example of the same kind of tough love a surgeon sometimes exhibits when facing a difficult case. It’s like telling a child, he assured Hewitt, that “we’re going to have to open your head up and take out this tumor. They’re not happy about it, believe me. And they don’t like me very much at that point. But later on, they love me.” So, presumably, will those “dead innocent children” in Syria -- once they get over the shock of being dead.

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[Buy the book](#)

[Mainstreaming Torture](#) by Rebecca Gordon is a book that explores the ways in which the United States has normalized torture and the impact it has on society. The book is a collection of essays that examine the history of torture in the United States, from the Civil War to the present day. It also discusses the role of the media in shaping public opinion and the ways in which the government has used torture to achieve its goals. The book is a powerful and thought-provoking work that is essential reading for anyone interested in human rights and the history of the United States.

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