
COMMUNIST ATTEMPTS TO
ELICIT FALSE CONFESSIONS FROM
AIR FORCE PRISONERS OF WAR*

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THE United States Air Force has expended considerable effort to get a full, accurate and meaningful account of what happened to its personnel who were captured in Korea. I have been associated with these studies since their beginnings three years ago. Because we believe the experiences of our returned prisoners of war can tell us much about the nature of a potential enemy, about the soldier and airman, and about man, generally, these studies are continuing.

Of the 235 Air Force men who were returned by the Chinese Communists after the Korean Armistice—two years after, in the case of 15 of these men—about half had some direct personal experience with Communist attempts to extort false confessions. We know one airman died during such an attempt. There may have been others.

The attempts made against these men, the reasons for these attempts and the reactions of the men themselves comprise a very involved series of stories. The record of each of the long interviews conducted with these men after their return would engross you, I am sure. Almost all are exciting stories of individual heroism and perseverance. There is an almost unmatched drama in these airmen's efforts to protect principles, dignity and self-respect with only their own inner resources to sustain them. A few of the stories do not have completely happy endings and all of them reveal something about human imperfection.

Our objective here is science, however, not drama. Therefore I won't attempt what in any event I could probably not do well; that is, to relate in the space of a few minutes the meaning of these experi-

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ences to those who lived through them. A few honest, discerning and eloquent victims have accomplished this in a manner the social scientist need not and cannot match.

As a social scientist, I find of singular interest one result of the studies which we and other groups have recently made of Communist attempts to extort "confessions". It is that the finding of our studies which should be greeted as most new and spectacular is the finding that essentially there was nothing new or spectacular about the events we studied. We found, as did other studies such as those of Hinkle and Wolff,¹ that human behavior could be manipulated within a certain range by controlled environments. We found that the Chinese Communists used methods of coercing behavior from our men in their hands which Communists of other countries had employed for decades and which police and inquisitors had employed for centuries. The Chinese interrogators succeeded or failed to influence the behavior of their victims roughly to the extent that the skill and persistence of the personnel they employed matched those of practitioners in other places and times. While their initial attempts were generally inept and unsuccessful, their success tripled with experience.

The reception of these findings has frequently been incredulous and we have been asked: "Is there nothing more to it than this? Can people really be manipulated so easily? Are you sure there was not something done that you failed to detect?"

In selecting the material I should discuss here, I have been influenced by these kinds of questions. Such a selection precludes discussing the useful hypotheses about human behavior in situations of stress which our studies suggested.

Briefly, here is our analysis of this problem. We found that we could make a meaningful distinction between those measures the Communists took to render the prisoner compliant, on the one hand, and, on the other, those which sought to shape his compliance into the very specific patterns of "confessor" behavior with which the world has become familiar.

This distinction was suggested by the Chinese Communists' use of more or less identical methods of gaining compliance for a variety of different ends—for eliciting factual intelligence information, other forms of propaganda collaboration, as well as false confessions. In fact, prisoners met similar practices where no other objective could be

discerned but compliance for its own sake. The methods of gaining compliance they used included nothing which was not common practice to police and intelligence interrogators of other times and nations, where restraints precluding such tactics were not in force. Numerous historical examples existed where such practices produced behavior as greatly at variance with principles, self-interest and survival of the victim as any which occurred in North Korea and Communist China.

The methods they used to shape compliance into the now familiar pattern of the forced confession, we believe, can be understood as essentially a teaching procedure—teaching the prisoner how to comply. It was a complex teaching procedure, however. Its complexities were due to the elaborate and complex behavior which was sought, as well as to the fact that this behavior was so alien and offensive to the prisoner. It was further complicated by irrational aspects of the system within which the Communist interrogator operated. The system required him to teach without making his lessons explicit.

I should point out that the distinction between inducing compliance and shaping compliance is purely an analytic division. The two kinds of methods are not independent of one another nor separate in time.

I would like to discuss first the measures used by the Communists to induce compliance: to undermine the resistance of the prisoner. The experiences of American Air Force prisoners of war in Korea who were pressured for false confessions, enabled us to compile an outline of methods of eliciting compliance,² not much different, it turned out, from those reported by persons held by Communists of other nations. I have prepared a chart showing a condensed version of this outline. It shows our analysis of these techniques into eight general measures, some illustrations of the specific forms these measures take, and our judgment of the effect of each. In inferring purpose from our judgments of the effects the measures have on the victim, it is likely that those who employ these measures conceive of them differently than we do.

I have not included physical torture as a general category in this outline, despite the fact that many of our prisoners of war did encounter physical torture and despite the fact that a few of the specific measures in the outline may involve physical pain. I have omitted torture from the outline to emphasize that inflicting physical pain is not a necessary nor particularly effective method of inducing compliance. While many of our people did encounter physical violence, this rarely

CHART I.—COMMUNIST COERCIVE METHODS
FOR ELICITING INDIVIDUAL COMPLIANCE

<i>General Method</i>	<i>Effects (Purposes?)</i>	<i>Variants</i>
1. Isolation	Deprives Victim of all Social Support of his Ability to Resist Develops an Intense Concern with Self Makes Victim Dependent on Interrogator	Complete Solitary Confinement Complete Isolation Semi-Isolation Group Isolation
2. Monopolization of Perception	Fixes Attention upon Immediate Predicament; Fosters Introspection Eliminates Stimuli Competing with those Controlled by Captor Frustrates all Actions not Consistent with Compliance	Physical Isolation Darkness or Bright Light Barren Environment Restricted Movement Monotonous Food
3. Induced Debilitation; Exhaustion	Weakens Mental and Physical Ability to Resist	Semi-Starvation Exposure Exploitation of Wounds; Induced Illness Sleep Deprivation Prolonged Constraint Prolonged Interrogation or Forced Writing Over Exertion
4. Threats	Cultivates Anxiety and Despair	Threats of Death Threats of Non-repatriation Threats of Endless Isolation and Interrogation Vague Threats Threats Against Family Mysterious Changes of Treatment
5. Occasional Indulgences	Provides Positive Motivation for Compliance Hinders Adjustment to Deprivation	Occasional Favors Fluctuations of Interrogators' Attitudes Promises Rewards for Partial Compliance Tantalizing
6. Demonstrating "Omnipotence" and "Omniscience"	Suggests Futility of Resistance	Confrontations Pretending Cooperation Taken for Granted Demonstrating Complete Control over Victim's Fate
7. Degradation	Makes Costs of Resistance Appear More Damaging to Self-Esteem than Capitulation Reduces Prisoner to "Animal Level" Concerns	Personal Hygiene Prevented Filthy, Infested Surroundings Demeaning Punishments Insults and Taunts Denial of Privacy
8. Enforcing Trivial Demands	Develops Habit of Compliance	Forced Writing Enforcement of Minute Rules

occurred as part of a systematic effort to elicit a false confession. Where physical violence *was* inflicted during the course of such an attempt, the attempt was particularly likely to fail completely.

I should qualify my remarks on physical violence in two respects.

First, the ever-present fear of violence in the mind of the prisoner appears to have played an important role in inducing compliance. The Communists generally fostered such fears through vague threats and the implication that they were prepared to do drastic things.

Second, one form of torture was experienced by a considerable number of Air Force prisoners of war during efforts to coerce false confessions from them. The prisoners were required to stand, or sit, at attention for exceedingly long periods of time—in one extreme case, day and night for a week at a time with only brief respites. In a few cases, the standing was aggravated by extreme cold. This form of torture had several distinct advantages for extorting confessions.

In the simple torture situation—the “bamboo splinters” technique of popular imagination—the contest is clearly one between the individual and his tormentor. Can he endure pain beyond the point to which the interrogator will go in inflicting pain? The answer for the interrogator is all too frequently yes.

Where the individual is told to stand at attention for long periods, an intervening factor is introduced. The immediate source of pain is not the interrogator but the victim himself. The contest becomes, in a way, one of the individual against himself. The motivational strength of the individual is likely to exhaust itself in this internal encounter.

Bringing the subject to act “against himself” in this manner has additional advantages for the interrogator. It leads the prisoner to exaggerate the power of the interrogator. As long as the subject remains standing, he is attributing to his captor the power to do something worse to him, but there is actually no showdown of the ability of the interrogator to do so. Most frequently, although not invariably, the extent to which the interrogators in North Korea and China were willing or permitted to inflict physical punishment was very limited.¹ Generally, it appears to have been limited to cuffs, slaps and kicks, and sometimes merely to threats and insults. Returnees who underwent long periods of standing and sitting, however, report no other experience could be more excruciating.

For the interrogator, forced standing has still further advantages.

It is consistent with formal adherence to mythical principles of legality and humaneness important to the Communists. These principles are important in the interrogation—particularly in facilitating the adoption of a positive attitude by the prisoner toward the interrogator and the forces he represents. Adherence to these mythical principles also protects the interrogator from potential punishment at some future time for mistreating prisoners. The Communists, furthermore, can gain a considerable propaganda advantage when victims who are released truthfully state that no one ever laid a hand on them.

The two attributes of constrained postures we have discussed—the active enlistment of the energies of the victim against himself and the formal adherence by interrogators to twisted norms of humaneness and legality—apply also to other measures in the outline. These attributes help to account for the use and emphasis by the Communists of certain techniques for undermining resistance, and the neglect or de-emphasis of others. Techniques having these attributes are also consistent with the other aspect of “confession”-elicitation; namely, the *shaping* of the prisoner’s compliance into the very specific patterns of “confessor” behavior.

Assuming the measures I have discussed have made the prisoner compliant, the problem remains of getting him to comply appropriately—of informing and instructing him as to the forms of compliance. In the case of false confessions, this is a very complicated teaching job.

The kind of “confession” we are discussing consists of considerably more than the signing of a piece of paper which says: “On such and such a date I committed such and such a crime—signed John Jones.” It consists of considerably more than making an equivalent oral statement in a court. These “confession”-extortion efforts involve the attempt to manipulate the individual so that he behaves over an extended period as if:

- (a) he actually committed certain concrete acts which he can “describe” with meticulous detail;
- (b) these acts were “criminal”, in the sense of being violations of the most fundamental standards of human decency;
- (c) these acts were not isolated transgressions but manifestations of a “criminal” pattern in his thought and action;
- (d) his “crimes” were part and parcel of a larger nefarious political conspiracy;

- (e) his "criminal" role was motivated by a self-seeking alignment with this political conspiracy, of which he was only a pawn;
- (f) he is now remorseful and repentant;
- (g) his changed attitude is due to new-found political conviction for which he is indebted to his patient captors.

In this extreme form of "confession"-elicitation, as encountered by our men, the objective was not merely having the prisoner "confirm" that certain acts were committed, but rather to have his behavior confirm the entire world-view of the Communists relevant to those acts. Learning what behavior was being demanded and, even more, learning the elaborate symbols and nuances through which this behavior had to be expressed to be acceptable—these were complex learning tasks indeed. The tasks were perplexingly difficult since the interrogator seldom made these demands explicit. Only by indirection was the prisoner generally made aware of the "crimes" of which he was "accused". He had to use his own imagination and largely irrelevant events of his own life history to concoct an acceptable detailed account of things which never happened. Moreover, his "deposition" had to jibe with the more or less independent inventions of other prisoners whom he correctly presumed were in the same boat. His story had to fit the wild but unalterable preconceptions of his captors regarding the United States, the Air Force, and their operations and objectives. To escape the stress he was meeting because of what the interrogator informed him was his "incorrect attitude," he had to learn how the Communists felt a "repentant American war criminal" should behave.

The time through which these "confession" efforts dragged—two full years, in the case of one of our men—was, frequently at least, as much a function of the difficulties of shaping compliance as of inducing compliance. Not all instances of failure to comply with Communist demands can be legitimately called "resistance". In various instances, prisoners did not comply with certain Communist demands because of difficulty in learning what these demands really were.

For many prisoners, finally being able to learn what their captor wanted them to do was an achievement which afforded them considerable gratification—one of their rare gratifications in an exceedingly frustrating environment. Unfortunately, this was an instance in which the best if not the only way of learning was "learning by doing".

It should be understood that only a few of the Air Force personnel

who encountered efforts to elicit false confessions in Korea were subjected to really full dress, all-out attempts to make them behave in the manner I have sketched. The time between capture and repatriation for many was too short, and, presumably, the trained interrogators available to the Communists too few, to permit this. Of the few Air Force prisoners who did get the full treatment, none could be made to behave in complete accordance with the Chinese Communists' ideal of the "repentant criminal".

Nonetheless, the typical Chinese Communist "confession"-extortion efforts in Korea were directed toward eliciting all of the behaviors of the "ideal confessor". The extreme model consequently has significance for understanding what occurred apart from the extent to which it was realized in actuality.

I believe the mystery which pervades prevalent conceptions of Communist "confession"-extortion is due to misunderstandings of this business of the shaping of compliance, rather than that of producing compliance. Its total objective evokes images of diabolism and possession in the minds of many which now are associated with the term "brain washing". We are frequently asked for the number of our men who "confessed" and the number who "resisted". Frequently explicit, and always implicit, in these requests is an equating of "confessing" and being "brain washed".

The second chart I have prepared may help to show the difficulty we have in answering such questions:

This chart lists various behaviors which could possibly be the outcome of Communist "confession"-extortion attempts—behaviors ranging from the complete resistance visualized in the ideals of the "Code of Conduct for Members of the Armed Forces",³ at one extreme, through the complete compliance implicit in the manipulative attempts of the captor, at the other. In between are various degrees, forms and admixtures of resistance and compliance, arranged in an imperfect scale.

Insofar as the data we have from our Korean War cases is concerned, this chart is a mixture of theoretical and actual behaviors. For our Korean War cases, the behaviors at the extreme of compliance are completely theoretical—they did not occur. At the other extreme, that of resistance, the behaviors occurred only during the first stages of pressure, or when the coercive attempts were unusually brief, unskilled or prematurely terminated by external events. In all our cases where

CHART II.—RESPONSES TO DEMANDS FOR FALSE CONFESSIONS;
RESISTANCE AND COMPLIANCE

Complete Resistance	<p>Refuses to Cooperate in Interrogation</p> <p>Refuses to Engage in any Discussion with Interrogator</p> <p>Refuses to Affirm or Deny Accusations or Respond to Implicit Accusations</p> <p>Ridicules Accusations; Refuses to Discuss Them Seriously</p> <p>Responds with Indignation to Accusations</p>
Defensive Resistance	<p>Makes Simple Denial of Accusation</p> <p>Denies that Captor has Moral or Factual Basis for making Accusation</p> <p>Makes Statements and Depositions to Prove Innocence</p> <p>Makes Statement that Suspicion was Reasonable, "Investigation" Fair and Justified, but Protests Innocence</p>
Defensive Compliance	<p>Makes Statement of Possibility that "Crime" was Unwittingly Committed</p> <p>Makes Statement of "Objective Guilt"; i.e., that Results were "Criminal" Irrespective of the Motives</p> <p>Makes Ambiguous Statement, Containing no Explicit Admissions but which Constitutes a "Confession" by Implication</p> <p>Agrees to Comply, but Fails to Carry Through; e.g., Writes "Confession", but Refuses to Sign it</p> <p>Makes Obviously Unacceptable, "Sabotaged" "Confession"; i.e., makes Deposition with Obvious Inconsistencies, Contradictions or Indications that it was Obtained Through Coercion</p> <p>Accuses Associates, but Maintains Own Innocence</p> <p>Makes Incomplete "Confession"; i.e., Simple Admission of Acts Without Supporting Details Required to Make "Confession" Convincing and Without Expressions of "Repentance", Makes Statement Rationalized as "Harmless"</p> <p>Makes "Compromise" Deposition; Bargains with Interrogator for Acceptance of "Confession" of Lesser Crime, or for Altering Details of Deposition to Make it Less Offensive</p> <p>Alternately "Confesses" and Retracts</p> <p>Completes "Acceptable Confession", but Refuses Further Cooperation; e.g., Refuses to Implicate Others, to Make Recordings, Films or Elaborations of "Confession"</p>
Active Compliance	<p>"Confesses" to "Criminal Tendencies"; i.e., Makes Statement that his Attitude was as Criminal as if he had Actually Committed Alleged Crime</p> <p>Makes "Subtly Sabotaged" "Confession"; i.e., Incorporates Veiled Communications to Outsiders, but Without Making "Confession" Unacceptable to Interrogator</p> <p>Completely Cooperates in all Explicit Demands Associated with Theme of "Confession"; Pretends to Accept Guilt</p> <p>Strives to Please Captor; to Anticipate Demands; Pretends Repentance</p>
Complete Compliance	<p>Accepts "Objective Truth" of "Guilt"; Shows Involuntary Symptoms of Remorse</p> <p>Accepts "Guilt" as Literally True</p> <p>Makes Behavioral Choices Indicative of Complete Identification with and Commitment to Captor</p>

persistent and intensive efforts to extort "confession" behavior was made by the Communists, the final outcomes were distributed through the broad range of intermediate possibilities.

Among the Air Force prisoners pressured for false confessions in North Korea and in Communist China, there are cases of simply incredible heroism, fortitude and attachment to principle in the face of particularly intensive Communist coercion. There are also cases—far fewer in number although far more publicized—of a surprising inability to withstand coercion. Nonetheless, depending upon how one chooses to draw the line, it is possible for us to say truthfully that all who were really involved resisted, or that all complied, for in truth the behavior of all involved at some point a mixture of compliance and resistance. In almost all, resistance was the dominant ingredient.

The one remaining question is why the Communists proceeded in this strange way. It is not, I am convinced, because they were guided by some esoteric knowledge and rationale which give them unprecedented ability to bend people to their will. Insofar as "confessions" for propaganda use are concerned, these could have been elicited much more quickly and easily by coupling the standard measures for inducing compliance with very explicit demands for the false statements they required. False confessions were in fact extorted from Air Force personnel more quickly and economically by North Koreans who apparently had not yet learned the Communist way of doing things. The self-castigation and ideological ranting which the Communists sought, and at which almost all of our people balked, I would think, detracts rather than adds to whatever propaganda value "confessions" might have. All this assumes that some purpose as rational as propaganda is always the major reason for extorting "confessions," and this appears quite definitely *not* the case.

The mystery associated with the things I have discussed stems not from their rationality but from their irrationality. Unlike the cynical Nazis who merely perpetrated the Big Lie, the Chinese Communist personnel whom our prisoners encountered in Korea were required to live the Big Lie.

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