

UNSUPPORTED ALLEGATIONS ABOUT A LINK BETWEEN
MILGRAM AND THE CIA:
TORTURED REASONING IN *A QUESTION OF TORTURE*

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In researching the biography I wrote of Stanley Milgram, *The Man Who Shocked the World: The Life and Legacy of Stanley Milgram* (Blass, 2004), I was surprised to discover the pervasiveness of misinformation and misstatements about Milgram's obedience research—something that is a continuing phenomenon. For example, two writers gave Milgram a nonexistent middle initial, calling him “Stanley J. Milgram” (Lemov, 2005; Markle, 1995). Another referred to the experimenter as “graduate student confederates” (Baumrind, 1985), when, in fact, he was a moonlighting 31-year-old high school biology teacher named John Williams. One occasionally sees the participants in Milgram's experiments, who were adult residents of New Haven and surrounding areas, erroneously described as students; and the lecturer in the “Great Courses” video series (The Teaching Company, 1997) describes the subjects as turning up a dial on the shock machine, whereas the “shocks” were supposedly delivered by pressing switches arranged horizontally along its front panel.

One gets the sense in encountering these and other errors or misstatements that, at least in some cases, the writers were relying on their memory, or even that they were basing their accounts on second-hand information and may not have actually read Milgram's original writings. All of the above misstatements could have been avoided by the simple act of checking Milgram's obedience book (Milgram, 1974) or his earlier journal articles (e.g., Milgram, 1963). For example, all it would have required to realize that Milgram did not have a middle name is a perusal of the title page of one of his books or the first page of one of his journal articles. Or, for a more conclusive statement, one could look to Milgram himself. In 1963, he accepted an appointment at Harvard as an assistant professor in the Department of Social Relations. During the hiring process, the departmental secretary asked about his middle name, explaining that a person's full legal name was required when corresponding with the Dean. Apparently, seeing this as a bureaucratic requirement without any rhyme or reason, he replied to her appropriately in verse (see Blass, 2004, pp. 132–133):

Dear Miss Thoren:
My heart is heavy
And spirit lame
For I was born
With no middle name
Vexing as an unsolved riddle
Is a name without a middle
I rely on tolerance
To quell all signs of remonstrance
Stanley [] Milgram
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While one could reasonably argue that the examples I cite are minor, there may be some truth in the saying, “The devil is in the details.”

On the other hand, the prevalence of relatively small factual errors in descriptions of the obedience experiments lends some evidence to the claim (Kotre, 1992) that they (as well as some other classics in social psychology) have attained the status of scientific parables. An implication, perhaps, of this view is that, as long as the narrative structure—a story with a surprise ending—remains intact, one need not worry about the minor details.

Recently, however, a claim has been made about Milgram’s obedience experiments which is distinguishable from the mostly minor misstatements exemplified so far by its seriousness. As far as I have been able to determine, the claim has no factual basis whatsoever. Accordingly, the aim in this article is to provide a detailed refutation of the assertion and, thereby, to reaffirm the true historical record regarding one of the outstanding figures of twentieth-century psychology.

What I am referring to is the contention that Stanley Milgram’s obedience research may have been funded by the CIA. Specifically, the contention appears in a book by a University of Wisconsin historian, Alfred W. McCoy, *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, from the Cold War to the War on Terror*:

In searching for other university research that contributed to the CIA’s evolving torture paradigm, the famed Yale obedience experiments by a young psychologist, Stanley Milgram, seem a likely candidate. Since the agency regularly laundered MKUltra [CIA’s program on the control of human behavior] funds through other federal agencies to some 185 nongovernment researchers and has refused to release their names, we have no way of knowing the full scope of academic investigation that might have advanced the CIA’s study of torture. But the timing, at the peak of the agency’s academic involvement, and the topic, torture, raise the possibility that Milgram’s work may well have been a part of its larger mind-control project. (McCoy, 2006, p. 47)

But *Torture* presents not a shred of evidence that Milgram received CIA funding, and I have no reason to believe that this claim has any foundation. For my biography of Milgram, I studied thousands of pages of archival materials—from Yale, Harvard, CUNY, the Archives of the History of American Psychology in Akron, and the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton—and I interviewed or communicated with more than 80 people. In the course of all of this research, over many years, I *never* came across the slightest suggestion of a Milgram-CIA connection. Moreover, the case that *Torture* makes for this connection is, at least in my view, phantasmagorical.

To my astonishment, *Torture* bases its speculative claims against Milgram on a simple, benign set of circumstances that is detailed on pp. 65–70 of my biography of him (Blass, 2004). One of the three granting agencies that Milgram sent preliminary letters of inquiry to in October–November 1960, asking about the possibility of their supporting his planned obedience research, was the Group Psychology Branch of the Office of Naval Research (ONR). (The others were NSF and NIMH.) In the end, Milgram only sent a formal application to, and was funded by, NSF (not ONR or NIMH). At the time, there was certainly nothing out of the ordinary about contacting ONR to inquire about possible funding. During the 1960s, ONR supported basic, mainstream social-psychological research that was virtually indistinguishable from the kind of social psychology research that was then being supported by NSF and NIMH. In fact, coincidentally, in the same issue (October 1963) of the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* in which Milgram’s first obedience article (“Behavioral study of obedience”) appeared, the lead article (by Raven and Eachus) was funded by a grant from ONR.

As *Torture* describes it, Milgram’s negligible contact with ONR—writing preliminarily to ask about the possibility of funding but never submitting an application—turns into “his

close ties to the ONR” (p. 47), “Milgram’s intelligence connections” (p. 49), “why the ONR would have been so solicitous of Milgram’s career” (p. 49), and “his ONR patrons” (p. 49). And because, according to the above quoted paragraph from *Torture*, the CIA used other federal agencies as conduits for its research funding to academicians, *Torture* suggests, without citing any evidence and using “guilt by association,” that Milgram’s funding also originated from the CIA. Admittedly, *Torture* does contain some qualifiers in making its claims to this effect—for example, *Torture* refers to “possible ONR or CIA pressure” (p. 47)—but these qualifiers typically are intermingled with sentences that contain unqualified and unsupported claims that Milgram had “intelligence connections.” See, for instance, examples 1 and 3 below from *Torture*’s narrative.

In *Torture*’s account about Milgram, we can find some questionable presentational devices that serve to advance the book’s claim about Milgram’s possible CIA funding. Specifically, the following examples demonstrate the book’s use of time-compression to make dubious connections, selective use of information from my book, and, to my knowledge, plain misstatements of fact, as well as statements that are blatantly contrary to common knowledge and widely shared opinion.

1. After writing about how Harvard denied Milgram tenure, *Torture* states: “However, Milgram’s intelligence connections apparently saved his career. He was soon hired, with a promotion to full professor, by the new graduate dean at the City University of New York, Mina Rees, who had recently retired as deputy director of the Office of Naval Research” (p. 49).

In fact, while Rees, as CUNY’s dean, approved the hiring of Milgram, it was Howard Leventhal, a colleague of Milgram at Yale, who initially proposed him to CUNY, and the ultimate recommendation to hire him resulted from a unanimous decision of a committee of psychology faculty, not from anything that Dean Rees did (see Blass, 2004, pp. 156–157, 165). Equally important, perhaps, the claim in *Torture* that Rees had “recently retired” from ONR is plainly wrong. In fact, she had left ONR in 1953—when Milgram *was still an undergraduate* at Queens College—14 years before Milgram was hired by CUNY! I should mention that 1953 is clearly stated as the year in which Rees left ONR to return to her previous academic home, Hunter College, in a biographical essay (Green & LaDuke, 1998) that *Torture* cites as the source for this assertion (see p. 223, footnote 72). So I do not understand how this seeming factual confabulation could have occurred.

Moreover, and most importantly I believe, as noted above, Milgram’s obedience research had been funded by NSF, not ONR. So Rees’ involvement in Milgram’s hiring by CUNY and when she retired from ONR are truly “much ado about nothing,” which proves nothing!

2. In describing the outcome of Milgram’s grant application to NSF, submitted in January 1961, *Torture* states that “the NSF gave Milgram a substantial \$24,700 grant—an exceptional mix of caution and largesse that hints at NSF reluctance and possible ONR or CIA pressure” (p. 47).

One can only wonder how *Torture* could draw such a conjectural and far-fetched inference about what supposedly happened behind the scenes at NSF simply on the basis of the dollar amount of the grant Milgram received. To hint, without any support, that there may have been “ONR or CIA pressure,” is, to my way of thinking (and to say the least), not the most circumspect approach to take. Furthermore, the suggestion that the size of the grant supposedly “hints at NSF reluctance” is at odds with (and ignores) the fact, which I begin describing on p. 113 of my Milgram biography—one of the pages that *Torture* references—that Milgram received, in rapid succession, two more grants from NSF for his obedience research, plus supplemental funding (see also Blass, 2004, pp. 319–320).

3. In its very next sentence, *Torture* claims: “Indeed, in later years when Milgram proposed other projects without ONR’s backing, the NSF rejected all his applications, even

though they featured a *similar method* [my emphasis] using a mechanical device to test aspects of human behavior” (p. 47).

I find this statement doubly troubling because not only does it contain a misstatement of fact, but also because it erroneously references my biography of Milgram as its source. The end of the quoted sentence from *Torture* refers the reader to footnote 70. The text of footnote 70, which appears in the Notes section in the back of the book (p. 222), cites pp. 235–242 of my biography of Milgram as the source for the quoted text. But the NSF proposals I describe in those pages were neither about support for conducting more obedience experiments nor were they proposals for research using “a similar method.” Nor did they involve using any mechanical devices to gauge behavior. Rather, these proposals were to support making films on research ethics and to support Milgram’s research on cyranoids! (For those who are unfamiliar with the term, I might mention that a “cyranoid” is a term that Milgram used to describe a person who communicates with another person by using the words of a third person, which are transmitted to the cyranoid by means of a tiny FM receiver in his ear.)

Another statement in *Torture* that would seem to have no factual basis is this: “Yale’s senior psychologist, Irving L. Janis, had written the seminal Air Force study of the Soviet mind-control threat, recommending the sort of experiment Milgram now proposed” (p. 47). The implication of this statement is that Milgram got the idea for his obedience experiment from his senior colleague, Janis.

I find this statement problematic for three reasons. First, it conflicts with Milgram’s own statements about the dual roots of his obedience research, namely, his attempt to fathom the Holocaust and as a sort of “spin off” from Asch’s line-judgment conformity paradigm (Milgram, 1977a; see also Blass, 1998, 2004; Fermaglich, 2006). Second, Milgram had a warm relationship with Janis, “who proved over the years to be a wise and constant friend” (Milgram, n.d.) and would certainly not deprive him of any credit that was due to him. In fact, Milgram would readily identify the source of an idea for a piece of research when he himself did not come up with it. For example, he credited his research on the “small-world problem” as originating from a theoretical model developed by Ithiel de Sola Pool, a political scientist, and Manfred Kochen, a mathematician (Milgram, 1977b; Blass, 2004). Third, the “seminal Air Force study” that *Torture* apparently is referring to (Janis, 1949) does not contain any recommendation whatsoever for conducting “the sort of experiment Milgram now proposed,” as alleged in McCoy’s book.¹

4. In an effort to support its claim that “Milgram’s experiment was a byproduct of the larger CIA mind-control project” (p. 49), *Torture* goes as far as to make claims that are contrary to widely shared opinions and common knowledge. On that page, we find the following:

Nobody has asked, even decades later, ...why the National Science Foundation would have funded an *experiment of so little value*. Although Milgram himself said he was testing theories about Nazi torturers, *World War II was long over* and his ONR patrons, like their intelligence confreres at the CIA, were now obsessed with winning the Cold War [emphasis added]. (McCoy, 2006, p. 49)

Rather than being “an experiment of so little value,” the obedience research is generally regarded as one of the most important social-psychological experiments of all time. Because

1. Curiously, the footnote (69, p. 222) to the statement about Janis’s recommendation references a URL containing a brief excerpt from his book *Victims of Groupthink* (1972); however, the excerpt contains no reference to any Air Force study. For the limited purpose of referencing the Air Force study, *Torture* should have cited Janis (1949), as it does in a different context at pp. 22–23. However, as Janis never recommended “the sort of experiment Milgram now proposed,” no citation to this effect could be accurate.

of its troubling implications about human nature, it has transcended the usual academic boundaries and can be found in publications of disciplines as wide ranging as philosophy, economics, business ethics, law, and medicine. Indeed, Milgram's obedience experiments continue to have broad impact on contemporary culture and thought. Just one of many current examples is a recent TV documentary, "The Human Behavior Experiments," broadcast by the Sundance Channel in June 2006. The program's aim was to show the contemporary relevance of three classic social psychology experiments from the 1960s and 1970s. One of them was the obedience research. (The other two were Latané and Darley's studies on bystander intervention and Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment.)

The fact that "World War II was long over" did not halt the continuing worldwide interest in trying to fathom the Nazis' genocidal program, which resulted in the death of 6 million Jews, as well as millions of others. In fact, in 1961, the year Milgram began his experiments, Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem drew over 700 journalists from around the world (Cesarani, 2006), resulting in Hannah Arendt's (1963) controversial book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, and Raul Hilberg's magisterial *The Destruction of the European Jews* was first published. In fact, in the decades since the 1960s, Holocaust consciousness, in its many forms, has far exceeded its magnitude during the 10 to 15 years immediately following World War II.

For all of these reasons, among others I could mention, it is my view that while *Torture* may have much to offer on other topics, its tortured suggestions about a CIA link to Milgram's research on obedience should not be credited.

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