

Torture Team – Deception, cruelty and the compromise of law by Philippe Sands.  
Allen Lane, 2008.

Torture Team, by the Matrix barrister and Professor of Law at UCL, Philippe Sands, is an excoriating analysis of the systematic torture of Guantanamo detainees by US service personnel as sanctioned at the highest levels of the Bush Administration.

Forensically, and fairly, Professor Sands unpicks the story of how a memorandum written by a Pentagon lawyer and signed off by Donald Rumsfeld, chief architect of the defeat snatched from the jaws of victory in Iraq, sanctioned the systematic and horrible abuse of detainees in Guantanamo, in direct contravention of the Geneva Accords, which George W Bush in his inimitable way had pronounced did not cover the captured Taleban and Al-Qaida ex-combatants. From there, and in further contravention of the US Army's own manual on interrogation procedures, cruel abuse in Abu Ghraib and elsewhere followed.

Philippe Sands travelled on several occasions to the United States to interview many of the protagonists in this sorry business, in particular those senior officials at the Pentagon who bear a large measure of responsibility for a policy that many believe would make them liable to war crimes sanction. His interviews vary in their level of success, and the openness and honesty with which his interviewees responded; in some cases, as with Major General Michael E Dunlavey, a lawyer and judge by profession, the reader is left with a sense of disbelief at how government policy blinded an essentially decent human being to the truth of what he was allowing to take place; in others, as with the former Pentagon officials William J Haynes, General Counsel to Rumsfeld, Doug Feith, Under Secretary of Defence for Policy and John Yoo, Deputy Assistant Attorney General at the Office of Legal Counsel, one is left with a sense of disgust at a gang of shifty and morally deficient individuals whose attainment of such high office is eloquent testimony to the power of political patronage in Washington.

Philippe Sands makes many important points in this powerful book, not the least of which is the vital importance of lawyers in ensuring that justice is never denied to anyone, no matter how awful the individuals in question may be; but Torture Team is also a further nail in the coffin of the Bush Administration and eloquent testament to its rottenness from the bottom to the very top.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh