



How to Break a Terrorist: The U.S. Interrogators Who Used Brains, Not Brutality, to Take Down the Deadliest Man in Iraq

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Finding Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, had long been the U.S. military's top priority -- trumping even the search for Osama bin Laden. No brutality was spared in trying to squeeze intelligence from Zarqawi's suspected associates. But these "force on force" techniques yielded exactly nothing, and, in the wake of the Abu Ghraib scandal, the military rushed a new breed of interrogator to Iraq.

Matthew Alexander, a former criminal investigator and head of a handpicked interrogation team, gives us the first inside look at the U.S. military's attempt at more civilized interrogation techniques -- and their astounding success. The intelligence coup that enabled the June 7, 2006, air strike on Zarqawi's rural safe house was the result of several keenly strategized interrogations, none of which involved torture or even "control" tactics.

Matthew and his team decided instead to get to know their opponents. Who were these monsters? Who were they working for? What were they trying to protect? Every day the "gators" matched wits with a rogues' gallery of suspects brought in by Special Forces ("door kickers"): egomaniacs, bloodthirsty adolescents, opportunistic stereo repairmen, Sunni clerics horrified by the sectarian bloodbath, Al Qaeda fanatics, and good people in the wrong place at the wrong time. With most prisoners, negotiation was possible and psychological manipulation stunningly effective. But Matthew's commitment to cracking the case with these methods sometimes isolated his superiors and put his own career at risk.

This account is an unputdownable thriller -- more of a psychological suspense story than a war memoir. And indeed, the story reaches far past the current conflict in Iraq with a reminder that we don't have to become our enemy to defeat him. Matthew Alexander and his ilk, subtle enough and flexible enough to adapt to the challenges of modern, asymmetrical warfare, have proved to be our best weapons against terrorists all over the world.

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From Reader Review How to Break a Terrorist: The U.S. Interrogators Who Used Brains, Not Brutality, to Take Down the Deadliest Man in Iraq for online ebook

Anna Brand says

Passages blacked out by the DoD aside, it's a fairly transparent look at modern interrogation tactics. The author seemed falsely modest until you learn he was screwed out of a Bronze Star. Probably the motivation for the book.

Viola says

How to Break a Terrorist is an insightful and entertaining account of the U.S. intelligence operation that was instrumental in the killing of Abu Musab Al Zarqawi, the head of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. This non-fiction book is a fast-paced psychological thriller. In addition to being exciting to read, the book makes a political statement on torture and intelligence gathering. The author presents a viable and arguably more effective alternative to torture to get information out of detainees. Through the well-crafted storyline, the author illustrates these new interrogation techniques of psychology, building rapport, respect (or at least the perception of it), and ultimately, deception.

By and large, I enjoyed the book and have only a couple minor complaints. One, I didn't care for the blacked out sentences. I suppose the intention is to make the reader feel that they are getting a glimpse of the top secret intelligence world. And blacking out sentences makes the account seem more authentic and special. Instead, I felt that it was purposely done, like special effects in a movie, and hence fake. Two, because the book is written as a story (which I appreciate), I wonder about all that is missing. The book recounts the successful interrogations with minimal emphasis on the unsuccessful ones. Hence, attaining the end goal almost seems too easy. Nonetheless, I am forgiving on this point because I understand that recounting all the false leads and dead end interrogations would detract from the storyline and make the book boring.

I definitely recommend this book to everyone, but especially to Americans who have little interest in or knowledge of our conflicts in the Iraq and Afghanistan. Because the book reads like a psychological thriller, it is easy to become engrossed in the story. You don't have to be up to date on current events to enjoy this book. And meanwhile, it will open up your eyes and give you a glimpse of what may be going on in the Middle East.

Lauren says

(Dug review out of the depths of LiveJournal.)

I found this book both interesting and problematic. This great! new! way! of interrogation! is very meet the new boss, same as the old boss. OK, you're not waterboarding folk, but you are lying to them and &c., &c. It's been a while since I read it so I can't quite remember everything that I disturbed me.

Dale says

A fascinating read

How to Break a Terrorist: The U.S. Interrogators Who Used Brains, Not Brutality, to Take Down the Deadliest Man in Iraq is a fascinating must-read for anyone who is interested in the war on terror. I was handed this book by a friend and I assumed it was going to be a typical anti-war screed that demands that terrorists be "understood" and coddled.

There is also little fear of coddling with Alexander. He is repulsed and haunted by the senseless butchery that went on in Iraq and was sickened by those that were willing to kill innocents with suicide bombings. Alexander's techniques only prove that his eyes were strictly on the goal - stop Zarqawi.

Alexander's techniques are hardly "touchy-feely" - in a way they are a form of psychological trickery. He fools his interview targets into giving him the information he wants and then exploits their trust. It is also the type of technique that any regular viewer of TV detective shows see every day.

The methods Alexander espouses only make sense to me, a veteran teacher. It is easier to get cooperation from someone that you can create a sense of rapport with, even if it is only temporary.

Anyway, the book reads like a suspense novel. It is a quick and intense read and absolutely riveting and informative.

Well done. Highly recommended.

<http://dwdsreviews.blogspot.com/>

Caleb says

This book is a fascinating take on a virtually unknown subject - military intelligence. Matthew Alexander is an interrogator for the US military and this book is the story of how he and his team gathered intelligence from POWs which led to the death of Abu Musab Al Zarqawi, an Islamic fanatic who was trying to instigate a civil war amidst the United States' efforts to bring peace.

The common idea of interrogation is one of waterboarding, dark rooms with the single light bulb focused on the prisoners face as he sits handcuffed to his chair. Alexander expels this theory with an in-depth revelation of new philosophies of intelligence-gathering. No more a process of intimidation and threatening, it has rather become a game of psychology, manipulating emotions until the prisoners trust is gained. The author comes through with accounts of exact conversations and situations.

I highly recommend this to anyone interested in anything military. It is a refreshing and unusual view into the behind-the-scenes work of the United States.

Bubba says

Riveting and Examples of Why Humans should be treated with respect

I couldn't put this book down. An easy read, it was a good reminder that people should be treated with respect and dignity, no matter how evil they may be.

Abby says

I really, really hate terrorists. When I was pregnant with Benjamin, my husband's best friend Ben got shot in Afghanistan by terrorists. We named Benjamin after him. My husband was also in Kuwait then, and I was home alone for almost a year and a half, pregnant, then with a baby for what seemed like forever. I got guns and a security system, and I started to have rage filled (I will blame pregnancy hormones) fantasies about someone breaking into my house, assuming I was a helpless pregnant lady (or lady with a baby) with no husband home, who would be an easy target. I'd shoot them in the legs, possibly maiming them before turning them over to authorities, and then go do the talk show circuit. Criminals everywhere would learn that you should not mess with army wives! I also dreamed of killing terrorists, who were constantly trying to kill many of my army wife friend's deployed husbands. Oh, I hated those terrorists so much. I thought, "They think trained American soldiers are scary? They should see this crazy angry pregnant lady with a gun!!"

My ultimate fantasy: a high ranking terrorist comes to Utah and breaks into my home in the middle of the night to steal my TV. I hold his whole group of thugs hostage with my personal home arsenal, proving you should not break into an army wife's house, and becoming a national hero by ending lots of wars and genocides.

Seriously, I really hate terrorists.

Kater Cheek says

This book feels like a well-restrained diatribe against torture from a man who interrogates prisoners for a living. It consists of anecdotes about real people, complete with the black bars of government censorship. It would have been a stronger book had the author done research and included background information and corroboratign examples rather than relying soley on his own experience, but I commend him for hiring a skilled ghostwriter.

Jonathan Derringer says

How to Break a Terrorist by Matthew Alexander is an excellent and thrilling true war story. I personally have read many war books in the past year, including No Easy Day by the Navy SEAL who killed Osama bin Laden. As I was searching for another interesting war story to read and comprehend, my intelligent librarian suggested this outstanding novel to me. I am not a huge fan on reading and will not devote my days to reading, but when I started to read this book I could not put it down. I honestly could say I was hooked to

it, spent a big portion of my free time reading it, and when I did not have free time I yearned for the next time I had to read the story. After evaluating all of these books, I must say that How to Break a Terrorist tops all of them, and I would highly recommend it to anyone who is interested in modern war stories involving wars our great country is still concerned over.

How to Break a Terrorist is a very suspenseful story that involves patience, too. This war story is aimed at people who enjoy suspense and learning about war, while it is also trying to inform the public of how interrogation is used in an attempt to take down high-valued terrorists. The book describes how one of the top interrogators in the country played a huge role in tracking down very high valued al-Qaida terrorist players in Iraq. How to Break a Terrorist mainly takes place in 2006. This is a time period where the war in Iraq was intensifying, and al-Qaida was pushing hard to start a civil war between the main groups in Iraq: the Shiites and the Sunnis. Causing the civil war between the two rival groups of people would make it extremely difficult for the U.S. to control Iraq and continue hunting down murderous al-Qaida terrorists. However, al-Qaida was attempting to start a Civil War in very evil and murderous ways. The terrorist organization would create bombs, strap them to insurgents, and have them walk into markets and public places where women and children were and self explode. As a result of the increase of these types of bombings, there was more and more pressure on the main character and interrogator Matthew Alexander from President Bush himself to find the man behind these terrorist acts in Iraq, al-Zarqawi. Alexander was at first a crime scene investigator back in the States, but was called up to join the effort in Iraq of interrogating insurgents in hopes of acquiring information regarding al-Zarqawi or people close to him. Alexander shows hard work and determination at its finest as he tries desperately to get any kind of information out of these insurgents who have been trained to counter the Americans' interrogation. Alexander also uses peaceful tactics, focuses on building rapport, and makes certain that he does things by the book when interrogating. How to Break a Terrorist is an excellent and superb biography, true war story, and book full of suspense. However, the important points of this book are not to show and become the best war story, the best biography or the best book full of suspense. Instead, it was written to inform the public how interrogators give everything they have to get information out of some of the most dangerous people in Iraq and the Middle East. It also is meant to show the different types of interrogation, and how Alexander uses peaceful ones and believes they produce the best results. Another point the book is trying to establish is that even when things get tough and seem like something tragic is going to happen, one must become even more determined and work even harder to accomplish their goal. Lastly, it is meant to show that we can be successful in Iraq and the Middle East even if things look like they are heading south. I think Alexander does a fantastic job in exploiting all of these points. The author has multiple descriptive details that explain how interrogation works and how they interrogated terrorists in Iraq. Also, Alexander writes about how times were very hard and it seemed almost impossible to get any more information out of their detainees. However, the book shows that the interrogators did get vital information out of the terrorists and that they were in fact successful in the Middle East.

As a big fan of military stories, I highly recommend this novel. Especially if you liked No Easy Day and Into the Fire, then How to Break a Terrorist is definitely for you. Also, if you believe torture should not be used on prisoners in order to gather information, then you will highly appreciate this novel. On the other hand, there are parts of the story that are extremely sad and quite disturbing. If you do not like the effects of war or reading about sad stories particularly in the Middle East, then I would not advise you to read this book.

James says

Powerful and eloquent. The author is an interrogator with extensive experience in both police and military

roles, and he thoroughly debunks the rationalizations for torture that made possible the abuses at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib - counterproductive abuses, in that they provided much less useful information than more appropriate methods, and in the terrible damage to America's standing in the world.

However, these legal, appropriate, and moral methods are more difficult to use than the simple thuggery which characterized those abuses of prisoners and the entire approach of that administration to foreign affairs.

This is one of the books I recommend to anyone who is studying the insurgency/counterinsurgency war in Iraq. A fascinating story I stayed up all night to finish reading.

Frank says

***+/5

Mark says

This book was referenced within an article which Mark Bowden wrote for *The Atlantic*. That article, and this novel, note that torture is morally wrong but move past that to highlight the belief that torture techniques were not particularly fruitful when it came to garnering useful intelligence. Rather, the adoption of torture techniques and their subsequent failure are a part of the more general organizational failure which the US military is deemed to have suffered through the first half of the war against al-Qaeda.

This short book follows the author's efforts in leading a team of intelligence agents during the interrogation of 5 Iraqis who were captured, detained, and questioned. The story outlines the success of the 'new' softer interrogation techniques which focus on the use of trust and respect as the foundations of an effective interrogation as opposed to traditional approaches which rely on control and intimidation. The story concludes with these techniques being instrumental in producing information leading to the targeted killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, which was viewed as the biggest success of the war effort to that point.

Main points aside, there are also two dynamics afoot which I found particularly interesting. The first is the stubbornness of military thinking/tradition when it comes to how one views a suspected member of al-Qaeda and subsequently how that person is questioned. The second aspect I found interesting is the distinction between dyed-in-the-wool al-Qaeda operatives and those Sunni who turned to al Qaeda out of concern for either their financial or physical well being. These members are not fundamentalists, but rather have come to see al-Qaeda as being a last resort to protect themselves from the Shia militias.

An engrossing and informative read. Suggested for anyone who would like to hear a positive and compelling example of how a morally correct approach can also be the most effective, even under very trying circumstances.

PL says

Decent if perhaps self-serving

Decent if perhaps self-serving book, which makes a good case for the author's main points. However, it's easy to imagine that the author sees himself as perhaps more of a hero fighting against the odds, than would be borne out by a discussion with all those involved.

Andy says

I have always been interested in anything war related. Be it modern war or American Revolution there is something about war stories that have the ability to catch my interests. How to Break a Terrorist, by Mathew Alexander, is different than any other war book that I have ever read. The idea of reading this book was given to me by a friend that really enjoys reading the same material as me. He told me that the story was unlike any war story he has ever read before and I instantly became interested. The story revolves around interrogating several captives of the al-Qaida terrorist group in Iraq. The interrogations are unlike anything I have ever read and it gives an in depth look at what actually happens when trying to find the most dangerous man on earth. Overall, this book opened up a whole other style of reading that I will look more into in my future.

The entire objective of the interrogators is to infiltrate the people closest to the al-Qaida leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Zarqawi and his terrorist group were responsible for the deaths of thousands of innocent men, women, and children. They have been striking terror all over Iraq through random bombings and cold-blooded murder by firing squads and other horrible methods. Mathew and his group are given the challenge of interrogating their way up Zarqawi's chain of command in order to find Zarqawi and give directions on where to find and kill him. Mathew must deal with his divided group of gators, as they call themselves, who are in dispute on which style of interrogating to use. Many of his veteran gators believe in using force and power to try getting the terrorists to talk, but his new group of gators was taught to use compassion, love, and brains to get information out. Every day and night the gators went to work on their individuals and worked endlessly to get vital information regarding the person next in line in the chain of command. Whether interrogating the religious wing or the operational wing of Zarqawi's men how to get information from these people varied almost with every terrorist. Some terrorists caved in when talking about family and how unsafe they are, while others were terrified of dying in Abu Ghraib, where the prisoners were sent to be put under trial for their crimes. Many of the prisoners that were sent to Abu Ghraib were executed no matter what they said because of their association with Al-Qaida. Mathew uses tactics even some that are considered forbidden, to work their way to around terrorists that aren't talking. It is unlike anything that I have ever read and it offers the truth behind the Army's ability to find the most protected and dangerous people on earth. This story has several important points where the group of interrogators is very close to a breakthrough that would lead to information that inches them closer toward their main goal of Zarqawi. Mathew spends the majority of the time in the Hollywood room where he oversees all of the interrogations. This is where he must use his knowledge to help his group to in finding ways to get the prisoners to break. Many of the prisoners are very well taught in not giving up any information. Every prisoner has something that makes him or her break and it was very interesting seeing just what does the job. They know that giving up locations and important information will probably lead to their name being released as a traitor.

If you are looking to read a heart warming love story then this not your book. This book can make you sad, mad, disappointed, and happy at times. It will leave you with impressions of both Americans and Iraqi's that were never thought of before. I would absolutely recommend this book, but only to readers who are mature enough and are interested in war type books. If you like the Twilight series then you probably won't like this book. This book is much more real life and is certainly not a romance. Readers who enjoy any type of war stories should enjoy this book and the twist it brings to the normal war stories. It tells the truth like never before I really really enjoyed it.

By: Andy

Lopezno Meneses says

The best book I have read in a while. a riveting read, a book that challenged me as a person, and a book that made me proud of the servicemen and servicewomen who serve in the coalition in the GWOT.
