Reforming the Military in Troubled Times

A review of

Fixing Hell: An Army Psychologist Confronts Abu Ghraib
by Larry C. James, with Gregory A. Freeman

Reviewed by
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When one is reviewing any book on a controversial topic, it is probably best to disclose at
the outset any personal factors that may contribute, consciously or otherwise, to how a book
is evaluated or interpreted. Let me therefore begin with some contextual information. My
father was a career Air Force officer who flew planes and fought in two wars. He was a
prisoner of war (POW) in World War II, escaping a number of times from German POW
camps. Assuredly there were many atrocities committed in the Nazi POW camps, but these
abuses and indignities appear to have emphasized starvation and deprivation, overcrowding,
forced parading, and the like more than they did torture associated with interrogation. My
brother was also a career military officer who served two tours of duty in Vietnam. And I
myself served on active duty in the Air Force and for a time in the reserves after that.
The military I knew, however, and that in which my family members served their careers did not much resemble the “hell” that Larry James describes with all-too-compelling detail in *Fixing Hell: An Army Psychologist Confronts Abu Ghraib*. In fact, the interrogation camps that were the focus of James's reform efforts as described in his book were, prior to their reform, as bad as many of those we associate with history's most despotic regimes.

*Fixing Hell* is a first-person memoir. It presents with considerable energy and wisdom James's experiences in two of the most famous American military detention and interrogation facilities of our age: the Guantanamo camp in Cuba and the Abu Ghraib camp in Iraq. James's account is a compelling, if idiosyncratic, view of what he encountered when he was called in as a change agent and how he set about correcting what was wrong.

In each case James, a now-retired career Army colonel who trained as a counseling psychologist and is a fellow in three divisions of the American Psychological Association (APA), describes his concerns with what he found when he was called in to address problems in two of the most controversial military detainment sites. The book describes how he tried to apply his considerable behavioral science knowledge to the “hells” he encountered. *Fixing Hell* is the account of a psychologist and military man and of action; it is not a scientific treatise and was clearly not written with the detached objectivity of a historian or scholar.

Although sympathetic to the purposes and the well-accepted norms and traditions of the military, James describes his struggles with the dual identities of military officer and psychologist. He is not afraid to criticize the military when it failed to follow its own guidelines and highest ideals. Nor does he spare his rage against those within the military, civilian politicians, or his fellow psychologists when he feels they are wrong in their behavior, attitudes, or understanding. And he expresses a particular disdain for those (including psychologists) who attempt to provide advice or counsel without the experience of having been in the situations about which they are so quick to criticize and advise.

The content of *Fixing Hell* is both interesting and provocative. The quality of the writing is not. The book reads more like a spirited conversation one might have with close friends over beer than a tightly disciplined, well-edited accounting. The use of scatological references and expletives creates “realism” the first few times, but it quickly becomes a tedious distraction. Similarly, the people James discusses are usually described in terms of their physical appearance, particularly those who are of small or large stature. Although the book weaves a compelling narrative, more careful editing might have turned an interesting book about an important topic into one that didn't distract from its message by its syntax.

Once the reader accepts that this book is Larry James's version of a complicated situation and that alternative views are not going to be presented or considered, it is easy to be sympathetic with the considerable personal risk James took in the two assignments that are here reported in depth. His descriptions of his personal behavior reflect bravery, heroism, and extraordinary commitment to create change in what is described as a horrific setting.
James was forced to confront military management and civilian oversight, both of which had gone awry.

What is clear throughout this narrative is that James is a man of action who put himself in harm's way, taking his charge to create institutional change very seriously. He was seldom shy about confronting people, including those in power, whose behavior he felt was inappropriate or interfering with the job he was called on to do. Yet he is also strongly sympathetic with military personnel—especially the enlisted men and women—and he holds their leaders responsible for much of the misbehavior of enlisted personnel. Above all, he demonstrates the role and relevance of psychology and behavioral science in addressing complicated questions of human behavior. James clearly describes what it is like to be a psychologist in the middle of a war zone, to fear for one's life constantly, and yet continue to do one's job well. He describes the aftermath of war in personal terms by sharing the dynamics of his own encounter with posttraumatic stress.

**Behavioral Science in War**

*Fixing Hell* shows how important psychology and the behavioral sciences have become to the well-being of the military in war. Using cogent examples, James demonstrates the pervasiveness of stress reactions in war and the severity of posttraumatic stress disorders among those who are lucky enough to survive it. More controversially, perhaps, James also shows the limitations of interrogations that use force, profanity, and degradation, and he describes how trust building and creativity can be much more effective in obtaining information from detainees. Whether psychologists should be involved in interrogations at all is a current controversy, still hotly debated, that is only briefly addressed in the book.

**Organizational Development and Institutional Change in Horrific Circumstances**

This is a book about a psychologist's efforts to create organizational and institutional change in extraordinary circumstances. The title of James's book makes clear that he aims to describe his efforts to bring about change in circumstances he, as have the media, describes as reprehensible.

James does an admirable job of presenting the leadership principles on which his work is based and his particular approach to organizational and institutional change. The most important of these are explicitly stated on pages 96–98 of the book and are illustrated graphically throughout the book. These principles are sound and generally consistent with the literature on organizational development and institutional change.
For example, James insisted on clear backing from senior military leaders before he undertook an assignment. He reported in Abu Ghraib to the commanding general, who had specifically called him in to address the situation and who supported his work, respected him, and helped him obtain what was needed to do the job when problems arose. James's service as an active, engaged positive force for change (another of his principles) was also important, as were the presence of a legal expert in detainees' rights and the practice of putting cameras in the rooms where interrogations occurred so that all sessions could be taped.

Perhaps the most important practice James implemented addressed the shocking tolerance of misbehavior and incompetence by military men and women that he describes throughout the book. He advises, “Put clear policies on acceptable and unacceptable behaviors into place in writing” (p. 98). Indeed, it is abundantly clear that the absence of clear rules and appropriate oversight in this new type of military setting contributed to the abuses that occurred. The interrogators were mostly young, inexperienced, and poorly trained men and women, and the absence of clear rules of engagement, let alone consistent enforcement, was at the core of many of the problems that occurred at these two detention sites.

James functioned primarily as a consulting psychologist, but he was ultimately a psychologist–manager. Whether providing consultation in the chow hall or advising interrogators, James was charting new territory in exceptionally difficult conditions. Whatever the specific application, his basic principles were clear: He valued proactive intervention, established rapport no matter how difficult the circumstances, exercised basic listening skills, and suggested innovative interventions. A more thorough discussion of the role conflicts inherent in this type of work would have been welcomed.

A more thorough discussion of the issues associated with creating deep and sustained institutional change also would have been valuable. James implemented changes that certainly sound impressive and impactful. However, we do not learn how these changes addressed one of the most difficult challenges in organizational change work: the survival of the changes beyond the immediate organizational development intervention.

**Heroes and Villains**

*Fixing Hell* only superficially addresses the broader and more fundamental causes of the type of abuse that had been allowed to develop in the interrogation and detention camps and the roles of leaders higher than commanding generals.

James was disgusted by the poor planning and unrealistic expectations of the Bush administration that resulted in the creation of the Iraq war. He suggests that the belief of the leaders in the administration of George W. Bush that the war would end quickly (as had the
one in defense of Kuwait's independence that had been waged by Bush's father) resulted in a failure to plan for what would happen after the war. To what extent the misbehavior of officers and enlisted personnel in these prisons could have been influenced by the false premises on which the war in Iraq was based is unknown.

However, it is clear that having a commander-in-chief who apparently saw no ethical conflicts with American values in incarcerating prisoners of war and other suspects in secret for indefinite periods implied that military personnel did not have to worry too much about how the incarcerated prisoners in such settings were treated. James makes it clear that terrorism is a real threat and interrogation is necessary; however, he also notes that this new kind of warfare calls for a different set of assumptions about how to treat detainees.

The heroes of this complicated story are not just Colonel James and his colleagues who used their integrity, intelligence, and creativity to turn around an impossible situation. The book also celebrates behavioral sciences in general and psychology in particular as tools that can bring about positive change in complicated, highly stressful situations.

Whatever their views on the appropriateness of psychologists being involved in military or police interrogation, psychologists who are even remotely interested in the topic should read, digest, and understand Fixing Hell.