

## Gina Haspel and Pinocchio from Rome

By [Edward Curtin](#)

Global Research, May 18, 2018

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

*Being in Rome, Italy and thinking of Gina Haspel, the CIA nominee and admitted torturer who says her "moral conscience" has changed after the fact, seems most fitting. Wherever you go in central Rome, you can hear the screams and smell the blood of those tortured and killed by the Roman Empire and those who ably followed in their stead. And you can see the crumbled stones and the pathetic architectural remains of those who thought they had triumphed. Their triumph turned to dust, and their belated mea culpas, if and when they ever came, always rang as hollow as Gina Haspel's, Lt. William Calley's, and Adolph Eichmann's excuses that they were only doing their jobs and following orders.*

Throughout Rome there are hawkers dangling Pinocchio trinkets in your face, constant reminders of the cost of lying. Or perhaps more aptly, the fame that ensues from lying followed by a childish semi-apology, even when it's as obvious as the nose on your face that you are lying still. So in the Senate Intelligence Committee hearing Haspel was asked by Senator Mark Warner, D-VA., the kind of question that allows a respondent to answer in a deceptive way that means nothing, but seems profoundly sincere. Warner asked:

If this president asked you to do something that you find morally objectionable, even if there is an [Office of Legal Counsel] opinion, what will you do? Will you carry out that order or not?

To which Haspel replied:

Senator, my moral conscience is strong. I would not allow the CIA to carry out any activity that I thought was immoral – even if it was technically legal. I would absolutely not permit it.

From all reports, neither Warner's nor Haspel's nose grew longer, but perhaps such deceptive phrasing slyly falls beyond the parameters of Pinocchio's sins and the Blue Fairy's sanctions.

So the woman who oversaw detainee torture at a CIA "black site" in Thailand tells us she has a strong moral conscience, but she doesn't tell us what that conscience considers intrinsically evil, if anything. Nor what that "strong" moral conscience considers moral or immoral in any way, just that the "CIA must undertake activities that are consistent with American values," whatever they might be. And if she were ordered to carry out an action – let's say kill a foreign agent or assassinate a political leader – that was technically illegal but accorded with her strong moral conscience, would she do so? Don't ask; she wasn't. Even Pinocchio would get confused with this legerdemain, and his "strong" moral conscience, Jiminy Cricket, would be utterly bamboozled.

The good Senator, adept at playing deceptive verbal games as befits his stature, is happy to have his non-question answered with a non-answer, and both he and Haspel are happy. Good question, good answer, good conscience. Nothing bad about that. Then Warner goes and votes for Haspel, who he says is “among the most experienced people to be nominated” to head the CIA, and Haspel says she thinks torture – excuse me, “enhanced interrogation” – doesn’t work anyway. Practicality wins the day.

But here in Rome so many regular people are not so practical. They seem to relish life, not as a task to accomplish, but as a pleasure to enjoy. Despite the history that surrounds them, and the dismal political economy that weighs heavy on their lives and country, they seem less anxious and terrorized than Americans. Of course this may be a visitor’s myopic vision, and when seen clearly, Romans might be as stressed as Americans. But I doubt it.

But for this visiting American, it is hard to dismiss thoughts about the disgraceful charade happening back in Washington D.C. Thinking here in Rome of the Haspel vote, I am reminded of the ex-CIA Director Allen Dulles’s and long-time Chief of Counterintelligence James Angleton’s organized “Ratlines,” the escape routes for Nazi and fascist killers and torturers, so many of whom were brought to the United States and other countries after World War II through Italy to help the newly formed CIA torture the truth out of detainees and assassinate opponents. Operation Paperclip, they called it. No big deal; just a joining of two like-minded organizations by a tiny device.

Post September 11 torture is nothing new, and Haspel is nothing if not a traditionalist just doing her job. Is this what Haspel meant by “American values”? Many victims would attest to that.

In an old city like Rome one tends to think old thoughts: that the history of torture, human treachery, lying, and violence has a long history; that secular and religious fanatics are nothing new; and that empires rise and fall and everyone dies, even those who build monuments to their own “glorious” deeds.

But if one wanders around Rome and through life with no itinerary, one also encounters beautiful people and small pockets of faith, love, and devotion. One encounters magnificent art that embodies the heights to which humans can aspire. One realizes that despite the gory history of the human race, the killers and torturers, humans have and do rise above their worst inclinations and do the work of angels, despite the devils.

As we were sitting at a café in the Piazza della Rotonda, my wife said to me, “You have your back to the Pantheon.” It was true. Those monumental gods bored me. My glass of vino rosso whirled my mind to better things. Lighter. Not stone idolatry. Not empires, except their death. Not stone gods, nor inquisitors or black sites or hooded torturers with Ph’d’s from Harvard. No palaces to Renaissance princes or Central Intelligence agents, corrupt bastards of different times and places. No Wall Street/CIA nexus. No dastardly gross stupid rich Trump with his orange hair and phallic towers, nor his doppelganger Berlusconi here in Italy. No basilicas, nothing petrified, despite the city of stone that enclosed me. Like the sparrow that alighted on the next table and was pecking at the bread in a basket, my thoughts flew to lighter and more sustaining images of life and love and the spirit of care that sustains this beautiful world despite the torturers and killers.

Gina Haspel seemed so far away – yet so very near. My thoughts kept returning to all the U.S. Senators who have voted for this torturer to lead the CIA. Will they say they were only

doing their jobs and following orders? Do they think of themselves as civilized?

I then looked up as the bird took flight and saw a cross silhouetted against the blue sky. Enough said.

Where will we conduct the next Nuremberg trials?

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