Tick, Tick, Boom

A decision-making simulation around interrogation tactics in counterterrorism investigations

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This simulation was originally developed by K. Anne Watson under the supervision of K. Chad Clay at the University of Georgia (UGA), determined by UGA's IRB to be exempt as human subjects research in 2019 (PROJECT00000377). Questions about the simulation can be addressed to Annie at annie.watson@mga.edu.

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Facilitator Instructions

Materials Needed

- Two dice for each student and a set for yourself (alternatively, if everyone has a smart phone or laptop on hand, there are dice simulator apps and websites[1])
- Situation, rule, tactic flowchart, and record sheets for everyone

Class Time Needed

Tick, Tick, Boom itself is designed to be completed in a single 50-minute class session. The spoken debrief may add a little more time.

Set-Up

This activity is not meant to stand alone—it is meant to be used in concert with lectures, readings, and discussions on the use of torture around the world, the prohibition of torture under international law, and the freedom from torture as a human right. A (neither exclusive nor exhaustive) list of recommended readings is included at the end of these instructions.

Thus, the complete recommended order of activities is

1. Pre-test regarding views on torture (if using, torture survey included)
2. Lecture(s)/Discussions(s)
3. Tick, Tick, Boom
4. Debrief
5. Post-test regarding views on torture (if using, same as the pre-test)

Two recommendations: First, I recommend numbering each of the record sheets and shuffling them before you hand them out. This will help with a later stage of the game (after the fourth bomb). If you have a large class, you can use a roll of the dice after the fourth bomb, instead.

Second, when I use this set of activities, I prefer to keep them all anonymous. I think it makes students more likely to answer honestly about the kinds of things they consider torture (or don't). One approach to this, if you plan to collect the simulation documents afterwards or match the pre-test, record sheet, and post-test, is to have them all select (non-institutional) ID numbers. An alternative is to have them draw numbers from a hat (and then use a selection of these numbers to fulfill the recommendation above, as well).

[1] Example here: https://www.random.org/dice/

Game Play

1. Introduction: "This is a decision-making simulation around the use of interrogation tactics in counterterrorism investigations. Please note that your participation today is anonymous between you and your instructor and voluntary."

2. Pass out the game documents and dice.

3. Read the situation and rules sheets out loud.

4. Perform a short demonstration of the game. (This is key for helping students understand.) Remember to place tally marks or Xs in the trackers on the non-torture and torture tactic sheets. An example of a completed record sheet has been provided below for you to use in the demonstration.

5. Give everyone 3-4 minutes to familiarize themselves with the tactics, flowcharts, rules, and record sheet. Call for questions.

6. Proceed with the game. For each "hour" of gameplay:

    - Announce the hour.
    - Ask students to select their interrogation tactic and write a brief explanation. This will take a little longer the first few "hours."
    - Call for shock/death checks (during which everyone in the class should roll their dice, even if they don't need to perform a shock or death check[2]).
    - Call for answer checks (during which time everyone should roll their dice, even if they don't need to perform an answer check).
    - Give students a few seconds to determine if their roll resulted in an answer or not.

    A few notes:

    - In hours 1 and 2, you will not need to call for shock/death checks (because it is not possible for any participants to need either yet).
    - In hour 2, I recommend reminding participants that if they selected a non-torture tactic in the hour 1, they have to wait during hour 2—they should still roll their dice with everyone else, but they can't mark anything on their sheets again until hour 3.
    - Shock checks start in hour 3 (only for those who have used torture tactics in each of the preceding hours).
    - Death checks are added in hour 4. These can be conducted at the same time as shock checks because students won't need to perform both checks at once. Note that death checks are only for participants who have suspects have in shock and decide to continue using torture tactics anyway.

[2] The noise coverage matters here. Only students using torture tactics will ever need to perform shock and death checks, so if not everyone rolls, it becomes clear which students are using which tactics, and their decisions (or judgments of each other) might become biased.

7. After the fourth bomb, ask students to tally their total casualties. Remind them that everyone has at least 10,000 casualties, because of the bomb that exploded at the very beginning of the simulation, and that no one should have more than 100,000 casualties.

The Twists

Don't share any of these in advance!

1. Announce to the room that all teams who did not use *any* torture tactics were able to discover that there is a fifth bomb. Only these teams will be able to continue interrogating their suspects for the location of this final bomb. Teams that used torture should add 50,000 to their total casualty count at this time.

   Proceed with another 6 "hours," including shock checks starting in the third hour and death checks starting in the fourth hour for participants who will choose to use torture at this point (it happens). Instruct them to track these hours in the margins of their record sheets. Remind the room that *everyone* should continue rolling their dice. Give them the chance to add up their casualties again.

2. Ask students within a range of numbers written on the record sheets to raise their hands. I usually aim for approximately 10 percent of students (because the situation identifies that we're only 90 percent sure that our team has the right person). Thus, in a class of 40 students, I would ask students with the numbers 1 through 4 written on their record sheets to raise their hands and then tell them that their teams have mistakenly apprehended someone unconnected with the terrorist organization. All of their answers are null, and their casualty count jumps directly to 150,000.

3. Finally, tell the room that, as per the situation, the teams who used torture and get caught will go to prison, so the entire room will do one last roll for those who need to perform a prison check. This check is based on the severity of the torture; students should use the check for the most severe outcome for which they qualify:

   - Use of T1-T6: Any combination of rolls summing to 6 or 7 sends their team to prison.
   - Use of T7-T20: Any combination of rolls summing to an even number sends their team to prison.
   - Suspect Death: Any combination of rolls summing to 2 through 9 sends their team to prison.

Debrief Survey and Discussion

This is arguably the most important part of the simulation—don't skip it! I usually do a two-part debrief: written and spoken.

The written debrief gives students a space to explain their approach to the simulation, react to their experience of the simulation, and think through the applications of course materials before discussing all of the above. Much like a Think—Pair—Share activity in class, it gives them the chance to get their thoughts in order. It also gives you a written record (still anonymous) to parse

out trends in approaches and experiences, as well as in which course content stood out to them in the moment. An example simulation survey is included at the end of these materials.

The second part of the debrief is spoken. You might consider asking for everyone's casualty counts to put on the board for comparisons (or ask for the lowest and highest casualty counts). I also like to take the chance to ask participants for their initial, gut responses to the game.

At this point, it's important to introduce the idea that ticking time bomb scenarios are inherently flawed. This situation, like all others of its type, is based on the idea that officials are certain about a number of things—that they have someone related to the bombs, that that person can definitely tell officials where they are, that the bomb can definitely be defused if its location is known, and that officials are so desperate that they're willing to engage in something that they would never normally do. These kinds of situations are incredibly misleading. They're meant to serve as a defense against people who are totally opposed to torture, geared at making them admit there are *some* circumstances in which they would be willing to admit that torture is necessary. Because of this, they ignore the fact that torture is often an institutionalized practice and that information officials (and others) have is often surrounded with uncertainty (Luban 2005).

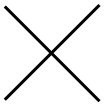
This is the chance to help students genuinely consider whether or not they are willing to normalize the use of torture. How many people would they be willing to see tortured in these situations? How much? For how long? How many lives have to be at risk? How sure do they have to be that getting the information will save lives? Where do they draw the line—if they fail to get information from these potentially innocent people, are they willing to move on to torturing their loved ones to increase the pressure? Do they draw lines at specific ages? This is often the time when students' perspectives start to make clear shifts.

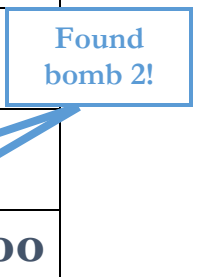
At some point following the debrief, students can also retake the torture survey as a post-test (if using).

Sources and Recommended Readings

- DePillis, Lydia. 2014. "This is how it feels to torture." *The Washington Post* (December 11).
- Feinstein, Dianne. 2014. *The Senate Intelligence Committee Report on Torture: Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program*. Melville House.
- Luban, David. 2005. "Liberalism, Torture, and the Ticking Time Bomb." *Virginia Law Review* 91: 1425-1461.
- Prokop, Andrew. 2014. "The huge new Senate report on CIA torture, explained." *Vox* (December 9).
- Richards, David L, Mandy Morrill, and Mary R. Anderson. 2012. "Some Psycho-Social Correlates of US Citizen Support for Torture." Nordic Journal of Human Rights 30(1): 63-95.
- Schulz, William F., ed. 2007. *The Phenomenon of Torture*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Walsh, James I. and James A. Piazza. 2010. "Why Respecting Physical Integrity Rights Reduces Terrorism." *Comparative Political Studies* 43(5): 551-577.

Example Gameplay

Hour	Tactic Used	Why I Chose This Tactic	Shock/Death Check	Answer Check
Ex.	NT1	I prefer non-torture tactics and consider myself a tricky kind of person.		5+2=7 Yes
1	T15	I want to start off strong but not do too much damage.		2+3=5 No
2	T5	The physical approach didn't seem to work, so I'm moving on to emotions.		3+4=7 Yes
Bomb 2!		**Casualty Count:**		**0/20,000**
3	-	I decide to switch to non-torture, so I have to wait.	_____ _____	_____ _____
4	-	Still waiting.	_____ _____	_____ _____
5	NT1	I think I can outsmart the subject more easily than I can apply the other tactics.	_____ _____	1+4=5 No
6	-	I used an NT tactic in the last hour, so I have to wait.	_____ _____	_____ _____



Third use of torture requires a shock check.

Torturing a suspect in shock requires a death check.

7	T4	Non-torture takes too much time, and I'm worried about the next bomb.		1+1=2		2+4=6
				Yes		Yes
8	T16	Torture tactics seem to be working, so I'm sticking with them.		2+2=4		
				Yes		
Bomb 3!		**Casualty Count:**				**0/30,000**
9						
10						
11						
12						
13						
14						
Bomb 4!		**Casualty Count:**				**40,000/40,000**
Total Casualty Count:						**50,000/100,000**

Found this bomb in hour 7, so no casualties.

Killing the suspect means no more interrogations.

Don't forget the initial 10,000 casualties in the situation.

Torture Survey

Please mark each of the following actions taken by state agents as (1) necessary/acceptable in all cases, (2) necessary/acceptable in some cases, or (3) unacceptable in all cases.[3]

Not allowing a suspect to sleep.	1	2	3
Not allowing a suspect to sit or lie down.	1	2	3
Withholding food and/or water from a suspect.	1	2	3
Threatening to harm a suspect's family members.	1	2	3
Applying electric shocks to a suspect.	1	2	3
Making a suspect go naked.	1	2	3
Making a suspect listen to loud noise for long periods of time.	1	2	3
Holding a suspect's head under water.	1	2	3
Threatening to shoot a suspect.	1	2	3
Hooding a suspect for long periods of time.	1	2	3
Sexually humiliating a suspect.	1	2	3
Exposing a suspect to extreme heat or cold.	1	2	3
Punching or kicking a suspect.	1	2	3
Threatening a suspect with a dog.	1	2	3
Making a suspect face a mock execution.	1	2	3
Beating a suspect short of breaking bones, but bruising.	1	2	3
Humiliating a suspect via degrading language.	1	2	3
Sexually assaulting a suspect.	1	2	3

[3] Slightly adapted from Richards, David L, Mandy Morrill, and Mary R. Anderson. 2012. "Some Psycho-Social Correlates of US Citizen Support for Torture." *Nordic Journal of Human Rights* 30(1): 63-95.

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The Situation

A bomb explodes in a major city in the United States, killing 10,000 people. In the aftermath, a terrorist organization broadcasts a video announcing that increasingly larger bombs will detonate in random cities around the country every 6 hours until the organization's demands are met. The organization is demanding possession of all of the country's nuclear warheads—a demand that the US government refuses to meet. Through its various information channels, the government agency for which you work confirms that there are at least three more bombs awaiting detonation. Given the location of a bomb, experts can defuse them. It is not feasible to find the bombs without being given their locations.

Four hours after the first explosion, you and your team track down a single individual linked with placing the first bomb. You are 90 percent sure that this individual is a leader of the terrorist organization and holds the information that you seek, and you have been tasked with persuading the suspect to share with you the locations of the other bombs. Your superiors (off the record) have ordered you and your team to use *any means necessary* to get those locations—with the awareness that if you do use torture and it is exposed, you and your team may go to prison. The suspect has not spoken since you apprehended them.

The Rules

1. In each round of the game, you will choose among torture options, non-torture options, and waiting.

2. Torture and non-torture tactics have the same probability of producing an answer (to start).

3. Each non-torture option takes two hours of your remaining time.

4. Each torture option takes one hour of your remaining time.

5. You may use each non-torture tactic five times, but you may use each torture tactic only once.

6. After you have used two torture tactics, each additional torture tactic used has an increasing probability of either sending your suspect into shock or killing them.

7. Suspects leave shock only after the use of a non-torture tactic.

8. You must wait two hours to use a non-torture tactic after using a torture tactic.

9. Continue choosing tactics until you have found all of the bombs or your suspect is dead.

10. If playing in person, all participants should roll their dice (to make the noise) during each rolling opportunity, regardless of necessity (like for shock checks).

Non-Torture Tactics

Tactics

NT1	Trick the suspect into disclosing the location of the bomb.
NT2	Appeal to the suspect's better nature.
NT3	Persuade the suspect that it was wrong to place the bomb in the first place.
NT4	Offer clemency for revealing the location of the bomb.

Tracker

Tally your use of each NT tactic here.

NT1	
NT2	
NT3	
NT4	

Have you used a torture tactic in the last two hours or a non-torture tactic in the last hour?

Yes

You must wait to use a non-torture tactic.

No

How many times have you used this tactic?

# of Times	Sum of Dice for Answer
1	6 or 7
2	6
3	4
4	3
5	2

All non-torture tactics take two time periods. You must now wait through the next hour on the record sheet.

Torture Tactics

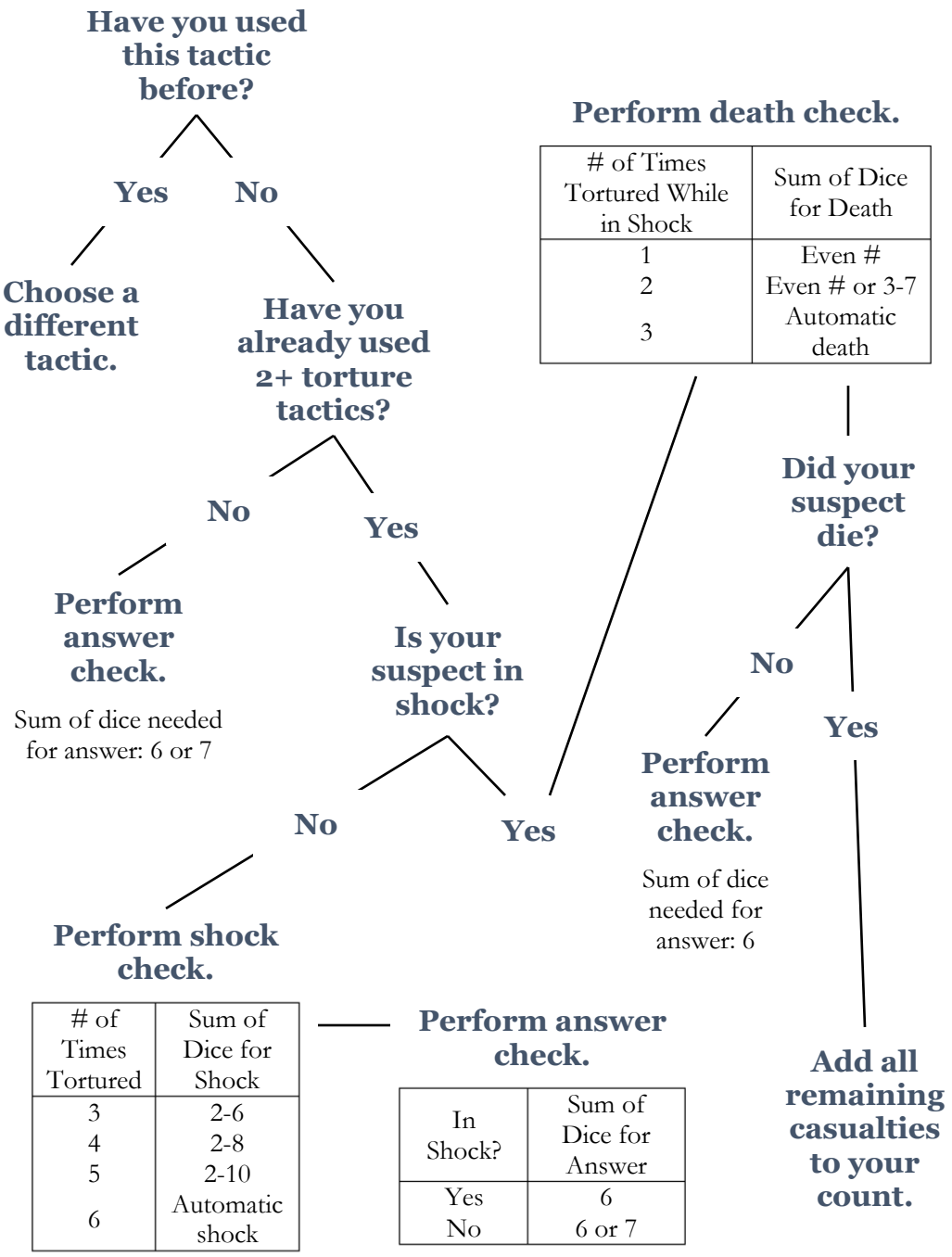
Tactics

T1	Humiliate the suspect via degrading language.
T2	Threaten to beat the suspect.
T3	Threaten the suspect with a dog.
T4	Threaten to shoot the suspect.
T5	Threaten to harm the suspect's family members.
T6	Make the suspect face a mock execution.
T7	Do not allow the suspect to have food.
T8	Do not allow the suspect to have water.
T9	Make the suspect listen to loud noise for long periods of time.
T10	Expose the suspect to extreme heat or cold.
T11	Do not allow the suspect to sit down.
T12	Do not allow the suspect to sleep.
T13	Make the suspect go naked.
T14	Sexually humiliate the suspect.
T15	Punch the suspect.
T16	Kick the suspect.
T17	Beat the suspect with a cane.
T18	Apply electric shocks to the suspect.
T19	Hold the suspect's head under water.
T20	Sexually assault the suspect.

Tracker

Track your use of T tactics here.

Number of T Uses	
1	
2	
Start shock checks.	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	
8	
9	
10	
11	
12	
13	
14	
Has your suspect entered shock? Start death checks.	
1	
2	
3	**X**



Record Sheet

Hour	Tactic Used	Why I Chose This Tactic	Shock/Death Check	Answer Check
Ex.	NT1	I prefer non-torture tactics and consider myself a tricky kind of person.	X	5+2=7 Yes
1			X	
2			X	
Bomb 2!		**Casualty Count:**		**/20,000**
3				
4				
5				
6				

7				
8				
Bomb 3!		**Casualty Count:**		**/30,000**
9				
10				
11				
12				
13				
14				
Bomb 4!		**Casualty Count:**		**/40,000**
Total Casualty Count:				**/100,000**

Simulation Survey

Please answer the following questions as honestly and thoroughly as possible. Note that your answers will not be reflected either in a grade for the activity or your grade for the course.

1. What was your casualty count at the end of the simulation?

2. Briefly explain your approach to the simulation.

3. Did you ever resort to a torture tactic? Why or why not?

4. Were any parts of the simulation instructions unclear? Which?

5. Did course content cross your mind while you participated in the simulation? If so, which content?

6. What, if anything, did you like about the simulation?

7. What, if anything, did you not like about the simulation?

8. Did you have any other questions or comments regarding the simulation?