

Torture the bombing suspect?

Consider this scenario:

The Seattle Times received a phone call at 9:30 this morning from a person with a male's voice claiming that he had planted a bomb set to explode in an unspecified location in downtown Seattle at 2pm today. The bomb, he said, was a small scale nuclear device that would probably level about ten square blocks in downtown Seattle, and would be only somewhat less destructive for several miles further out. He had no demands. He hung up after about 20 seconds.

Credible

His announcement was credible for the following reasons: Over the past six weeks there had been a series of unsolved small bombings around northwest Washington, and before each incident this same person (or at least a person with voice patterns that were similar to, or the same as, this one) had called and announced approximately where it would explode. The bombings had always proceeded just as the caller had predicted, and the more recent explosions been getting progressively larger. Today's bomb, however, was the first one of anywhere near this magnitude. *The Seattle Times* had notified the city police, the King County Sheriff's office, the FBI, the CIA, and FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) of the threat. These agencies had spent most of the morning searching for the bomb and the bomber.

By some great good fortune their concerted efforts had actually found a person they are convinced is the bomber - but not the bomb - and the police had brought him to a secure interrogation facility. However, it was now noon and the man had still not disclosed the location of the bomb. Local and federal law enforcement personnel had been aggressively questioning him for over 90 minutes and had gotten nowhere. They had tried every method in their arsenal of interrogation techniques and so far they had had no luck at all.

FEMA has indicated all morning that attempting to evacuate downtown Seattle in a few hours would be absolutely impossible and would cause more harm than benefit.

Someone has suggested using torture to persuade the captured man to disclose the location of the bomb. The bomb is set to explode (if the phone caller was being truthful) in 90 more minutes.

Should torture be used to interrogate the man or not?

Discussion Question

Imagine that in that moment - 12:30pm somewhere in the outskirts of Seattle - the decision-makers turn to you and ask: "What do you think? Should we employ torture in this situation or not?"

What do you think your answer in that situation ought to be? Please explain your reasons for answering that way.

Source: Dr. Tom Kerns, Introduction to Bioethics, <http://www.bioethicscourse.info/casesite/cs-torture.html>