Information and knowledge are the lifeblood of conflict in war, competition, and rivalry, and control over information is vital. To paraphrase American Express, you can’t go into battle without it. At the same time we try to conceal or deny access to our own information. Thus there is a built in tension within information systems. On the one hand they have to be flexible and porous enough to admit new information, store it, and circulate it among authorized users; on the other they must be rigid enough to contain and guard it. How they manage to balance and perform these tasks is significant, as certain incidents and patterns in the War on Terror illustrate.

By the summer of 2008 this war was being waged on 3 main battlefields, each with its own rules for information management and its own criteria and arbiters or gatekeepers for what information should be public and what should be kept secret or classified. The first of these battlefields is the military: the actual day-to-day operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan and against Sunni insurgents and Shiite militias in Iraq. Information about these struggles varies in direct ratio to the amount of conflict that is occurring, and much of it is relatively accurate in factual terms. Misdeeds and mistakes, such as attacks on civilians are acknowledged eventually, if not readily, and guilty individuals may be punished.

The second battlefield is the clandestine, “dark side” conflict waged by the CIA and other more or less secret agencies against al Qaeda in a variety of nations. Information about this conflict is considered vital to national security, and most of it is considered secret. Misdeeds and mistakes are easily concealed, and often the tactics used to collect this information, such as torture, create severe problems with the American legal system—which has become the third battleground of the War on Terror. In this conflict the US government’s antagonists are a coalition of lawyers, journalists, human rights organizations, and other interested parties, including the armed services’ own military lawyers who have been appointed to act as defense lawyers for accused al Qaeda suspects held at Guantanamo. Rules for collecting and using legal information are far stricter than those used by clandestine agencies, and this has hampered efforts to prosecute captured members of al Qaeda in attempts to achieve closure. What the two sides to this conflict do share is a need to collect and manage information on a vast, global scale because al Qaeda is a global organization.

Returning to the second battlefield, the discursive conflict generated by the “dark side,” such as the current torture scandal and efforts to conceal it, the good news is that now we have a President who is determined to stop the torture. The bad news is that members of the Bush administration, in their quest for “intelligence,” either to prevent new attacks or to justify the Iraq war, became lawbreakers themselves. What are the
courts going to do about them? And what are they going to do about the prisoners they tortured, some of whom may be innocent? Thus, for the side of the “War on Terror” focused on finding past and present leaders of al Qaeda, efforts to achieve closure by bringing them to justice, obtaining verdicts, and punishing them have devolved into a political and legal quagmire. The origins of this problem are not obscure.

In an interview on 16 September 2001, in which he was asked how the United States was going to “pay back big time” for the 9/11 attacks, Vice President Cheney said governments like Afghanistan’s that harbored terrorists would feel the “full wrath” of the United States, and he added later that in dealing with terrorists like Osama bin Laden, “We also have to work, though, sort of the dark side, if you will . . . to spend time in the shadows” (Russet). By February of 2002, bin Laden still had not been found, but Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfield announced that President Bush had informed him that the Geneva Convention did not apply to “terrorist detainees” (i.e. prisoners) from Afghanistan, but all would be treated “humanely” (“Abu Ghraib Timeline”). Gradually rumors and scandals began to leak out often about the military and the CIA, but sometimes from more obscure agencies, that they were allegedly performing all kinds of ugly semi-legal, extralegal, or downright criminal acts as their contributions to the War on Terror. All of these allegations became more credible in April 2004 when CBS showed the Abu Ghraib images on a 60 Minutes newscast, and lawyers, journalists, human rights organizations, and other interested parties began investigating more aggressively. What they often found, besides more instances of cruelty and abuse, was a pervasive pattern of duplicity, managing information to produce a blurring of the boundaries between facts and fictions, as well as those between legal and illegal behavior.

Because of this duplicity, information about this conflict became highly unreliable. Acts were being committed that might or might not be torture—depending on who was defining that word. There were secret meetings at places that did not officially exist—but some of them could be photographed if you had a camera with a very long lens. There were 81-page memos authorizing certain kinds of interrogations that were kept secret—though their contents were known for years through rumors. There were secret videotapes of CIA tortures that were hastily destroyed when their existence became known. There were disturbing revelations about living conditions and interrogation tactics at the Guantanamo Naval Base. There were fleets of airplanes owned by bogus companies used to transport prisoners to secret locations for interrogations—hence their nickname, “torture taxis”—even though outwardly they were just mundane Boeing 737s sitting on runways in regional airports. It was Cheney’s “dark side” hiding in plain sight, disguised as the ordinary. Abu Ghraib might be rationalized by arguing that most of the culprits were low-ranking, poorly trained guards and that the US Army had itself begun the tardy process of punishing the guilty and improving conditions (the Taguba Report). But Guantanamo, “torture taxis,” and the other “dark side” activities are different. They have to be funded from “black budgets” and
initiated or approved by high officials, so the culpability is much higher in the chain of command, and the rebukes or legal difficulties can be correspondingly more severe.

A minor character in Coppola’s Apocalypse Now—General Corman, the MI (Military Intelligence) commander—has to commission someone to hunt for a rogue Colonel, named Walter Kurtz and “terminate his command.” His choice is Captain Willard, an experienced (six definite kills) assassin, who is presumably on loan from the CIA and who does at the film’s end “terminate” Kurtz. As he briefs Willard, the General presents himself as a thoughtful man. He has a serious answer for why Kurtz is running amuck. It is, he says, “because there's a conflict in every human heart between the rational and the irrational, between good and evil. And good does not always triumph. Sometimes the Dark Side overcomes what Lincoln called 'the better angels of our nature.' Everything has got a breaking point. You and I have. Walter Kurtz has reached his. And very obviously, he has gone insane.”

It’s an intelligent comment, but it does not go far enough. As the rest of Coppola’s film illustrates, the conflict Corman describes can occur in institutions as well as in individual hearts. Armies, security forces, and even Presidencies can have their dark sides (to use the General’s and former Vice President Cheney’s language). Strategically placed groups and individuals within such institutions can control budgets and launder money, manipulate information and give commands that are obeyed but not recorded. “You understand, Captain, that this mission does not exist,” Willard is told at the end of the briefing in Apocalypse Now, “nor will it ever exist.” As the boundary lines between facts and fictions become more blurred and indistinct, so do the lines between guilt and innocence in ethical and legal contexts. Moreover, these boundary lines between reality and fantasy are also what we use, on a daily basis, to distinguish between sanity and various forms of madness, such as dementia, schizophrenia and paranoia. But these can be inflammatory terms, and therefore I would emphasize that despite the Bush administration’s attempts to confuse and/or sanitize this issue, torture was and is incompatible with America’s sense of its own identity. And as more Americans have learned more about the dark sides of many governmental institutions and agencies that (allegedly) exported torture from Washington, D.C. and its environs to deal with contingencies in Kabul, Baghdad, and elsewhere, they did not hesitate to condemn it, and, what is more important, to research it so that it can become evidence that can be used in court.

To give only one important example, the government’s efforts to conceal its activities by moving prisoners all over the world to torture them has created a world-wide community of plane spotters, air traffic controllers, and human rights lawyers who have learned the identities of the airplanes being used, their ownership by bogus companies, and their flight patterns which they follow. By communicating this information among themselves, which is only possible through computers and the use of the Internet, they are able to correlate it with “disappearances” so that conflicting testimony by prisoners and prosecutors can be evaluated. Thus,
eventually the American legal system—which has had to cope with Watergate and the Iran-Contra scandal—can begin to separate truths from falsehoods, which is a vital first step in moving from confusion and darkness into enlightenment and justice.