

Physicians for Human Rights

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://phr.org/our-work/resources/guantnamo-a-badge-of-shame/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

By Widney Brown

This post originally appeared in [The Huffington Post](#).

Fourteen years ago, the U.S. government opened Guantanamo Bay detention facility in an effort to create a place beyond the reach of the law and the Constitution a place where the absolute prohibition against torture and ill-treatment could be violated with impunity.

Today, the consequences of that pernicious move are being felt in every corner of the United States.

Our readiness to endorse the [use of torture](#) at CIA [black sites](#), including one at [Guantanamo](#), has fundamentally undermined the legitimacy of our police and other security forces. More ominously, it has created a divided world where those we perceive as other can be killed by law enforcers, harassed, deported or refused safe haven while the rest of us look the other way, confident that these wrongs will never happen to us.

Investigating crimes is hard, difficult work. A permissive attitude toward torture opens the door for law enforcers to extract coerced confessions without actually solving any crimes. It de-skills those who need to learn how to actually conduct legitimate criminal investigations and interrogations. Ultimately, it scars them by severing them from their own humanity and from ours.

U.S. law enforcement agencies have abandoned the rigor of evidence-based and rights-respecting investigations, rooted in the principle of innocent until proven guilty, in favor of a system based on [profiling](#) and denial of rights. Anyone who has ever experienced profiling whether on the basis of race or ethnicity, gender identity or national origin knows how arbitrary and capricious these practices are.

Guantanamo Bay detention center has been a rights-free purgatory for hundreds of men many of whom are there for no reason other than that someone wanted to collect a bounty from U.S. forces, or because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Investigators did not have to bring charges or release the detainees, who were presumed guilty and burdened with the impossibility of proving their innocence. In the absence of any actual evidence, their national origin, religious beliefs and mode of dress all were offered as proof of their guilt.

These heinous practices feed a rot that lies at the heart of abusive, ineffective and self-defeating police and security services. And they have enabled a national discourse in which entire groups can be vilified and dehumanized because they are seen as other.

The impossible-to-ignore trend of police killing unarmed black men and boys speaks to this point. [Michael Brown](#), [Eric Garner](#), [Dontre Hamilton](#), and 12-year-old [Tamir Rice](#) to name just a few were all killed by police in situations that had no justifiable reason for a violent end. The construction of black men and boys as presumptively criminal means that even the most benign behavior will be construed as threatening and may be used to justify their death at the hands of the police.

Similarly, the rush to paint all immigrants, including asylum seekers, from countries of the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia as potential terrorists points not just to a lack of compassion and empathy, but also to the failure of police and security forces to make evidence-based assessments of individuals who may be a threat.

Families fleeing violence in Central America are being held in [abysmal detention facilities](#) as the government races to deport them before they have even had an opportunity to make the case of a well-founded fear of persecution and seek asylum in our country. This is yet another example of sweeping judgments being made against those who are perceived as other in the name of protecting those who are privileged.

This brings us to how we lost our humanity by failing to reject torture, the narrative of fear, and all its consequences. The victims whether they are detainees in Guantanamo Bay, asylum seekers on our southern border, or black men in our communities will never be able to trust those in authority again. Meanwhile, the people whom our government employs in law enforcement and security roles are paying the moral and psychological price of having brutalized and dehumanized others. But all of us are also dehumanized by remaining passive when the government undermines dignity and rights.

It is time to say, Not in my name. It is time to say no to torture. It is time to cast away the political rhetoric of vilification and dehumanization.

It is time to examine our behavior and attitudes over the last 14 years to understand what we have created through acts of commission and omission. We the people of the United States must seize this moment to reclaim the principles of dignity and equality and reject fear and exclusion.

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