

Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)

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

https://www.cair.com/cair_in_the_news/bookman-torture-makes-us-forfeit-the-moral-high-ground/

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Two facts, neither of which is disputable:

1) CIA agents tortured suspected agents of al-Qaida, and they did so under the orders of top officials in the Bush administration, most likely including President Bush himself.

2) Under federal law, any U.S. official who engages in torture, or who approves or facilitates torture, is guilty of a felony. The law provides no exceptions.

Of course, there is no real news in any of that. Events of the last few days — an on-the-record confession by a CIA interrogator, acknowledging the torture; an admission by the CIA itself that the torture was approved by the White House and Justice Department, and that it destroyed videotaped evidence of the torture sessions — haven't changed much. They merely stripped away the flimsy gauze of deniability from what we knew was there all along but preferred not to acknowledge.

It is also important to point out that the shame is bipartisan and taints not just the administration but all three branches of government. Top congressional leaders, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, were informed of the practice in 2002 and made no peep of protest. Likewise, the federal courts have repeatedly found convenient ways to avoid confronting the issue, choosing time and again to look the other way rather than do their jobs under the Constitution.

Some have argued that torture was necessary to save American lives. Former CIA agent John Kiriakou told ABC News this week that in 2002, he thought that waterboarding was something that we needed to do. Today, he acknowledges that waterboarding is probably something that we shouldn't be in the business of doing because we're Americans, and we're better than that.

At the time I was so angry, Kiriakou said. And I wanted so much to help disrupt future attacks.

Of course, it is always possible to convince yourself that torture is necessary, particularly when anger clouds your judgment. The North Vietnamese who tortured John McCain and other U.S. pilots justified their cruelty on grounds that U.S. bombing of their country was illegal, and that McCain and his colleagues were war criminals not protected under the Geneva Convention.

Likewise, torturers in the Spanish Inquisition told themselves that waterboarding was permissible because they were saving souls from eternal damnation. The Nazis, another group fond of waterboarding, believed they were protecting their beloved Third Reich. Every torturer in history has thought himself justified by circumstances.

What's dismaying in this case is how cheaply this country sacrificed the moral principles we like to think of ourselves as upholding. We lost almost 300,000 troops in World War II, a struggle for national survival against two powerful empires, yet we did not stoop to sanctioned torture. In the Cold War we faced nuclear oblivion at the hands of the Soviet Union, but again torture was not among the officially sanctioned weapons we deployed to preserve ourselves.

But this time, under far less threat, we broke our own laws and voluntarily forfeited the moral high ground that is so important if we are to prevail in this struggle. Fear drove us to sacrifice long-term advantage in return for illusory, short-term security, and that doesn't speak well for us as a people.

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