

Human Rights First

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

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Public Facing Advocacy Writing

By Retired Maj. Gen. Walter L. Stewart Jr.

As we reflect on the anniversary of the operation to capture Osama bin Laden, there will undoubtedly be a chorus of voices proclaiming that "torture works" and that it makes our nation more safe. As somebody who has served to protect this nation for decades, I can assure you they are wrong.

Those who say that torture works link American soldiers and law enforcement with the methods employed by Spanish inquisitors or Imperial Japans interrogators. They also condemn Americans captured on future battlefields to treatment in kind. Our nations military knows this path is a two-way street.

If what was to be gained by traveling the path to torture was worth the price of transit, my Army would have told me so and trained me in tortures finer points. It would have directed me to teach others. But my Army did not.

Instead, the Army taught me and directed me to teach others that the United States has been a leader in adopting rules for its military forces which recognize that enemies are also human beings and that captured or detained people are entitled to retain their fundamental rights as human beings, regardless of their prior conduct or beliefs.

It also told me that information gained through torture or coercion is unreliable, and that I cannot be ordered to commit a criminal act such as murder, rape, pillage or torture.

Our nations concern for the treatment of captives traces back to our first commander, Gen. George Washington. On Dec. 26, 1776, George Washington defeated the Hessians at the Battle of Trenton and ordered his troops to Treat them with humanity. Let them have no reason to complain of our copying the brutal example of the British army.

Here we find the Golden Rule enshrined in U.S. Army doctrine. The military knows that what we do to others will be done to ours. Even more importantly, however, is the reality that torture doesnt work, and those in the know tell us it did not lead to bin Laden.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, who chairs the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, added that in the committees review of more than three million pieces of information linked to its study on the detention and interrogation of detainees, nothing indicated that torture led to the courier who played an instrumental role in finding Osama bin Laden.

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, who formerly led the CIA, has reiterated that finding, adding that some detainees who were subjected to enhanced interrogation techniques attempted to provide false or misleading information about the courier who guided U.S. forces to bin Laden.

Americans deserve the real story about torture. A good place to start would be the release of Feinsteins intelligence committees 6,000-plus page report that will lay bare all that torture has cost the U.S. in moral authority and international leadership. That report, once and for all, could silence tortures supporters with the facts.

Another avenue for the real story on torture comes from our current soldiers. For those serving on our nations battlefields, talk of torture is far more than words and theories emanating from political corners. They know its a risky proposition without reward and, quite frankly, they deserve better from us.

Retired Maj. Gen. Walter L. Stewart Jr. resides in Berks County. He is a former assistant adjutant general, Pennsylvania National Guard, and former commander of the 28th Infantry Division, Pennsylvania Army National Guard. He also is a Vietnam veteran.

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