

Physicians for Human Rights

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

<https://phr.org/our-work/resources/trumps-torture-stance-is-anti-american/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

By [Kerry J. Sulkowicz, MD](#)

President Donald J. Trump continues to insist torture [absolutely works](#), a jagged departure from fact, law, and morality. Within days of his inauguration, the White House was already circulating a [draft executive order](#) to reopen CIA black sites and review currently approved interrogation practices, presumably with a view to fulfilling Trumps campaign promises to bring back waterboarding and a hell of a lot worse.

Public outcry has forced the new administration to [walk back](#) some of the interrogation provisions, although it still calls for the continued use of the prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. But one wonders where Trump gets his conviction about the supposed usefulness of torture in the first place certainly not from his Secretary of Defense, CIA Director, or Attorney General, who have all rejected a U.S. return to torture. Indeed, the consensus of military, intelligence, and foreign policy experts is that torture does not provide anything close to accurate intelligence, and, in fact, harms national security.

More to the point, torture is anathema to civilized nations, and it is absolutely prohibited under U.S. and international law, without exception. The question of whether or not torture works is a misdirection, as if it could somehow be justified if it were shown to be effective. It cannot, and the question itself is an exercise in moral disengagement. It overlooks the fact that torture is antithetical to the United States values and identity.

The countrys first president and the drafters of the U.S. Constitution championed basic principles of human dignity and prohibited the infliction of cruel and unusual punishments. Centuries later, President Ronald Reagan reinforced this commitment when he signed the UN Convention against Torture in 1988.

Trumps position on torture is fundamentally ahistorical he fails to recognize that torture has been condemned throughout history because of its moral and legal futility. The Unites States leaders have forbidden the use of torture since its earliest days because it puts Americans in harms way. Any normalization of torture by the current U.S. leadership will put the country on par with enemies that have no moral center; if Trump allows torture, the United States becomes the very evil it purports to be fighting.

The Bush administrations decision to use torture as a weapon of war after 9/11, in contravention of American laws, values, and military doctrine, has been deeply damaging to democracy and to the countrys reputation as a nation built on law. And while President Obama rightfully ended the CIA program and Congress enacted laws to reinforce the ban on torture, no one who carried it out has been held to account. And Guantanamo a site and symbol of U.S. torture remains open.

So it should come as no surprise that torture advocates, who have never had the law or facts on their side, recognize the current moment as an opportunity. Perhaps if President Trump read the [Senate torture report](#) or listened to his national security advisors, he would have a better understanding of why the United States cannot be a nation that tortures. Torture has always been and always will be illegal, immoral, and counterproductive. Executive orders, and even tweaks to federal law, do not change this fact.

As we at Physicians for Human Rights have shown time and time again, all forms of torture inflict severe and lasting physical and psychological harm. This damage is not limited to victims; it extends to perpetrators as well. As the global standard for torture investigations, the Istanbul Protocol, [states](#): Torture is a profound concern of the world community. Its purpose is to destroy deliberately not only the physical and emotional well-being of individuals but also, in some instances, the dignity and will of entire communities.

The United States repudiation of torture is one of the most important ways the country has historically distinguished itself from its enemies. Yet President Trump would like the American public to believe that torture is suddenly a policy option, a justifiable tool for intelligence, or a valid weapon of war. He is mistaken. And if we start debating tortures effectiveness, weve ceded the accepted convention that, first and foremost, it is harmful and wrong.

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