

National Religious Campaign Against Torture

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

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On April 16, the Task Force on Detainee Treatment sponsored by The Constitution Project issued its comprehensive report on the interrogation and treatment of detainees in U.S. custody, particularly those taken in the aftermath of 9/11.

The report is easy to read but difficult to accept. Its most important finding is simply this, as summed up by the New York Times: It is indisputable that the United States engaged in the practice of torture and that the nation's highest officials bore ultimate responsibility for it.

The task force, which included conservatives and liberals, legal scholars, military and medical experts, was a bipartisan group whose chairmen were Asa Hutchinson, former undersecretary of the Department of Homeland Security for President George W. Bush and a former member of Congress from Arkansas, and James Jones, a former Democratic member of Congress from Oklahoma and ambassador to Mexico. The report provides an unbiased critique of how our nation's leaders responded to various threats. While the report concentrates more fully on the events that followed the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, it also offers information on ways the United States government did not fully comply with international law within the Clinton and Obama administrations.

The report -- the result of almost two years of intensive study, investigation and deliberation culminates in this declaration: The events examined in this report are unprecedented in U.S. history. In the course of the nation's many previous conflicts, there is little doubt that some U.S. personnel committed brutal acts against captives. But there is no evidence there had ever before been the kind of considered and detailed discussions that occurred after Sept. 11, directly involving a president and his top advisers, on the wisdom, propriety and legality of inflicting pain and torment on some detainees in our custody.

Why should we be aware of this report and its findings? Thomas R. Pickering, undersecretary of state for political affairs from 1997 to 2001 and ambassador and representative to the United Nations from 1989 to 1992, writes eloquently on the need to acknowledge our nation's wrongdoings in order to repair our standing in the world:

For more than four decades, in the service of Democratic and Republican presidents, it was often my job to persuade foreign governments to adhere to international law and observe the highest standards of conduct in human rights including the strict prohibition of torture. (The task force report to which I contributed) makes it clear that U.S. officials could have used the same advice.

Unfortunately, the U.S. government's use of torture against suspected terrorists, and its failure to fully acknowledge and condemn it, has made the exercise of diplomacy far more daunting. By authorizing and permitting torture in response to a global terrorist threat, U.S. leaders committed a grave error that has undermined our values, principles and moral stature; eroded our global influence; and placed our soldiers, diplomats and intelligence officers in even greater jeopardy.

I believe there is a much more important reason for us to read, comprehend and respond to this report. It is simply because torture is immoral. Regardless of our faith or even if we claim no faith discipline, to treat other human beings in such a manner is to deprive them of their dignity, their humanity, and at worst, even their lives. Moreover, it is demeaning to those who carry out such acts as well as to those on whose behalf such horrors are rendered. Without a full account of and response to our nation's use of torture, this will remain a stain on our moral conscience.

The Senate Intelligence Committee has completed such an account. However, it has yet to be released to the public. I join members of diverse religious and faith-based groups who have come together through the National Religious Campaign Against Torture in urging readers to call on Congress to demand the release of the Senate's torture report.

In Nebraska we once had a different perspective. In 1943, German prisoners of war were relocated to several internment camps in the state. At the same time, because of the war, many local workers were engaged in the war effort. It became apparent that the POWs were a ready source of labor. Most of those working outside the camp worked on farms or ranches and were paid wages guaranteed by the Geneva Convention rules. Many prisoners had found their treatment here to be better than their lives at home. A few found American sponsors and later returned to live in Nebraska.

When we torture, demean and treat others with contempt, we make enemies. When we treat one another humanely and acknowledge our wrongdoings, we build relationships -- both individually and at the national and international level -- that may lead to a brighter future of which we can be proud.

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