Human Rights First

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

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Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Op-Ed Contributor

By Antonio M. Taguba

ALEXANDRIA, Va. THE Senate Intelligence Committee will soon release key sections of its report on the Central Intelligence Agencys detention and interrogation of terrorism suspects after 9/11. In remarks on Friday anticipating the reports release, which he has publicly supported, President Obama acknowledged that we tortured some folks.

In fact, from leaks to the press and the statements of those familiar with the report, we know the committee has determined that C.I.A. torture was more widespread and brutal than Americans were led to believe. The committee reportedly has also found that the C.I.A. misled Bush administration officials and Congress about the extent and nature of the torture, and that torture was ineffective for intelligence gathering.

Even though a bipartisan majority of the committee voted to declassify the report, there is a concerted effort to discredit it by depicting it as partisan and unfair. The reports detractors include the C.I.A. itself: The agencys rebuttal will be released alongside the reports key sections. While the C.I.A. is under no obligation to stay silent in the face of criticism, it seems that between its apparently excessive redactions and its spying on the committees computers, the agency is determined to resist oversight.

Yet I know from experience that oversight will help the C.I.A. as it helped the United States military. Ten years ago, I was directed by Lt. Gen. Ricardo S. Sanchez, the senior officer in Iraq, to investigate allegations of detainee abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. My reports findings, which prompted a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, documented a systemic problem: military personnel had perpetrated numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses.

The findings, along with what became infamous images of abuse, caused a stir and led to prosecutions. The inquiry shed light on our countrys trip to the dark side, in which the United States government engaged in an assault on American ideals, broke the law and in so doing strengthened our enemies.

What I found in my investigation offended my sense of decency as a human being, and my sense of honor as a soldier. Id learned early about the necessity of treating prisoners humanely. My father, Tomas B. Taguba, a member of the joint American-Filipino force during World War II, was captured by the Japanese and endured the Bataan Death March.

It was clear to me in 2004 that the United States military could not be the institution it needed to be as long as it engaged in and tolerated abuse.

But the militarys path to accountability was a long one, and its leaders hardly welcomed oversight. A few months after I completed the investigation, I was reassigned to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, where I could be closely monitored. Then, in early 2006, I received a telephone call from Gen. Richard A. Cody, then the Armys vice chief of staff, who said, I need you to retire by January of 2007. No explanation was given. But none was needed.

I remain certain that by investigating inhumane treatment of detainees, I did my duty as a soldier, and that my inquiry along with one in 2008 by the Senate Armed Services Committee made the military a stronger, more trustworthy institution. As a result, interrogation and detention regulations were reformed and training programs were revised to comply with the Geneva Conventions.

Equally important, the military changed its command structures for detainee operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. And while accountability for the architects of the torture has proved elusive, more than 200 members of the armed forces have been punished for their involvement in abuse.

Ultimately, as we learned with Abu Ghraib, the best way of guarding against torture is an American public well informed about the moral and strategic costs of such abuse. In the absence of an open accounting, polls show that support for torture among Americans has

increased over recent years as proponents sow doubt about whether abusive interrogation is, in fact, illegitimate. So I am very concerned by the pre-emptive efforts of the C.I.A. to derail what we know to be strong criticism of the agencys conduct during the war on terror.

Agency officials, past and current, surely believe that by seeking to undermine the credibility of the report, they are acting in the best interests of the agency. But when the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Dianne Feinstein, has accused you of spying, you may want to reconsider your P.R. strategy. Yet we learn that the former C.I.A. director George J. Tenet, who presided over the enhanced interrogation program and later claimed that We dont torture people, is working with the current director, John O. Brennan, to shape the agencys response to the report.

One of President Obamas greatest actions as president and commander in chief came on his second full day in office, when he signed an executive order banning torture. But he has allowed the C.I.A. to oversee the redaction process of this report, and is now apparently allowing Mr. Tenet to run a publicity campaign against it. The president should make sure that Mr. Brennan who is, after all, his employee spurns Mr. Tenet and accepts oversight.

A failure of leadership took the country to the dark side. A strong presidential lead can ensure that we dont go back.