

National Religious Campaign Against Torture

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

https://www.nj.com/njv_guest_blog/2013/09/reckoning_with_us_torture_opin.html

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

An international human rights organization said it has uncovered evidence of a wider use of waterboarding than previously acknowledged by the CIA. Pictured here is the CIA seal at the agency's headquarters in Langley, Va.

By Rachel Kahn-Troster

In Hebrew, the word for repentance is teshuvah, from a root meaning to return. In Jewish tradition, before achieving repentance and forgiveness, one must return to the point of rupture, reckon with and name our misstep, or the wrong can easily be repeated. Moving on without looking back is easier, but it is incomplete.

The Jewish community is approaching its holiest day, Yom Kippur a day committed to self-reflection and teshuvah. In this season of reckoning, I urge all Americans to consider how our nation can learn from its troubled past of torture. In 2009, President Obama declared we must move forward rather than look backward on our use of torture, essentially saying repenting was unnecessary. The task of reckoning fell to others.

Two years ago, an independent organization, the Constitution Project, established a high-level, bipartisan commission, the Task Force on Detainee Treatment, to research American use of torture before and since 9/11. It brought to the surface harsh truths about government-approved torture and called it by its name.

Through interviews, site visits and careful reading of public information, the report documents our torturing, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11. It shows how the United States used techniques we condemned as illegal in the hands of others, including waterboarding, stress positions, extended sleep deprivation, sexual humiliation and prolonged solitary confinement. Some detainees were tortured to death.

The report acknowledges the significance of official sanctioning of torture. After all, the United States ratified the U.N. Convention Against Torture in 1994.

In the course of the nations many previous conflicts, there is little doubt that some U.S. personnel committed brutal acts against captives, the report reads. But there is no evidence there had ever before been the kind of considered and detailed discussions that occurred after September 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.

People often ask me why America should take the moral high road even when terrorists commit atrocities against civilians. But by torturing, the United States lost sight of the very values it claims to protect. The report justifiably compares this torture to the World War II internment of Japanese-Americans. What was once generally taken to be understandable and justifiable behavior, it argues, can later become a case of historical regret.

The report largely focuses on the Bush administration, but the Obama administration is not immune from criticism, having failed to close Guantanamo or declassify evidence on torture, and used the state-secrets privilege to dismiss lawsuits by innocent victims.

Since February, Guantanamo detainees have resorted to a hunger strike, frustrated by years of imprisonment without charge. Many have endured force-feeding, a tactic condemned by the American Medical Association and called torture by the U.N. Commission on Human Rights.

It would be unfortunate if the task force were the final word, because it lacked access to classified information and thus could not put to rest claims that torture was, and still could be, useful. Fortunately, more information is available.

In December, the Senate Intelligence Committee adopted a report on its three-year investigation into CIA torture. This report must be published. The committee leadership has said the report will show torture is ineffective and counterproductive to national security.

In the name of accountability and transparency, Truah, with our fellow members of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, understand the necessity of a full reckoning with American use of torture before national teshuvah can be achieved. The Task Forces incredible report is just a start. It is time for our elected officials to release in full the Senate Intelligence Committee report so we can begin to reclaim our place as a leader in human rights.

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