

National Religious Campaign Against Torture

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

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I have bad news for those who are not yet aware: Since 9/11, the United States has engaged in illegal torture, according to a bipartisan task force which completed a two-year investigation into the U.S. governments treatment of 9/11 detainees. Our representatives used interrogation techniques on detainees that the United States had previously condemned as illegal when used by others including waterboarding, stress positions and prolonged solitary confinement.

Let that last bit settle into your heart and mind for a moment.

The task force concluded that (t)he events examined in this report are unprecedented in U.S. history. In the course of the nations 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 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.

The task forces report was comprehensive, including interviews with eye-witnesses and a review of hundreds of pages of documents. But it is not the final word on torture. The Senate Intelligence Committee has produced an even more exhaustive report on torture, a 6,000-page product for which it reviewed millions of pages of documents. That report, though approved in a bipartisan vote way back in December of last year, remains classified. The Senate Intelligence Committees report is based in part, on information contained in classified documents. The report contains the truth about torture.

The public deserves to learn the facts that torture is shocking, horrible, ineffective and ultimately harmful to our nations long-term security. We cannot hold our elected officials accountable if we are kept in the dark about policies and practices even those from the past. A democracy is founded upon the idea that our citizens must be informed and aware of decisions made on their behalf. Task force members wrote that having as thorough as possible an understanding of what occurred during this period of serious threat and a willingness to acknowledge any shortcomings strengthens the nation and equips us to better cope with the next crisis and ones after that. Moving on without such a reckoning weakens our ability to claim our places as an exemplary practitioner of the rule of law.

Torture is not consistent with the U.S. democratic experiment. It is illegal. It is immoral. It violates international human rights. In 1994, the United States signed the UN Convention Against Torture, which binds our country to the following stipulation: No exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture.

Together with the members of hundreds of diverse religious and faith-based institutions who come together through the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, I join the call for the Senate to release the torture report to the public. My faith indeed all faiths are founded on the idea that everyone carries a piece of the divine within them and deserves to be treated with dignity, even if they have committed terrible crimes. Torture hurts us as a nation that claims to follow a model according to a universal set of human rights for all. When we discard our deepest aspirations and values, we undermine our democratic principles.

Our own Sen. Mark Udall has an important role to play in helping to achieve the release of the report. We must as Coloradans urge him to encourage his fellow members of the Senate Intelligence Committee to share the truth.

Roger Butts is an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister and serves as the Director of Family Ministries at Unity in the Rockies in Colorado Springs.

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