

The consequences of embracing torture

BY ROBERT CRAWFORD
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THE death of Osama bin Laden could be an opportunity for sober reflection and debate about the way forward for our country's response to the threat of terrorism and our relation to the greater Middle East. Given the democratic aspirations of the Arab Spring, it is more urgent than ever that America evaluate its own commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Instead, one of the first — and ugliest — responses to the killing of Osama has been the opportunistic revival of the claim that torture is good for America — in this case, that so-called enhanced interrogation provided the vital information leading to bin Laden's hideout in Pakistan. The claim is opportunistic not only because it has no basis in fact, but also because advocates of torture see the killing of Osama as a chance to wrap the celebratory flag around their torture policies. How should Americans respond to this pro-torture advocacy?

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture has been leading a call for a commission of inquiry into the causes and consequences of U.S. torture policies. These appeals have been ignored. Indeed, President Bush's public admission that he authorized waterboarding has elicited little more than official silence. The current president has counseled amnesia, best captured by his comment that "we need to look forward, not backward."

In the face of government failure, The Constitution Project has created a Bipartisan Task Force on Detainee Treatment to foster "a comprehensive understanding" about "past and current treatment of detainees by the U.S. government." Why is such an inquiry important?

First, we cannot put torture behind us because a "dark-side" America is still wrestling with a better America for the direction of national-security policy. The defenders of torture are not just looking backward in self-justification; they tilt toward the future in warning that if another terrorist attack occurs, Obama will be held responsible. In such an eventual-ity, a Republican victory in 2012 will likely mean a reversal of Obama's executive order prohibiting torture. Alternatively, Obama could easily concede ground on in-terrogation of terrorists suspects to

"political realities."

Should either occur, the implications for how the United States would be viewed in the Middle East and elsewhere are enormous. Polling by Zogby International has found that "what ultimately determined how Arabs viewed America was how they saw America treating Arab people."

Second, often overlooked, American soldiers who either witnessed or participated in abuses of detainees in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo suffer a kind of "moral pain" that takes a lasting toll on themselves, their families and their communities. Silence, along with the continued evasion of command responsibility, puts all the moral weight on their shoulders. The same is true about our relation to the victims of torture.

A defiant denial that we did anything wrong will not be sustainable as evidence continues to be made public and our allies press us to live up to our professed ideals of human rights. Unless we acknowledge the harm done to others and ourselves, remorse will be unable to do its work of strengthening our resolve toward creating a more just future.

Finally, the wound penetrates deeper than we know into the body politic, to the very heart of our democracy and the rule of law. Presidential lawbreaking is the worst lawbreaking of all. Does the public know that the law prohibits torture under all circumstances without any exceptions whatever? Does it know why these laws are so important to cherished ideals of human dignity and limited government? Does it know how the laws were manipulated by Bush administration lawyers?

My hope is that Americans will ponder the consequences of embracing torture: for what we stand for in the world, for our ideals of a common humanity and the sacredness of the individual, for our relation to the law and to the Constitution, for our tolerance of government secrecy, and for our ideals of limited government. What would it mean to normalize torture? And what would we tell our children?



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