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Crimes That Deserve Punishment

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By Eugene Robinson
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It's no longer possible to mince words, or pretend we didn't know. The International Committee of the Red Cross concluded in a secret report that the Bush administration's so-called "enhanced" interrogation methods, used on "high-value" terrorism suspects, plainly constituted torture. The time for euphemisms is over, and the time for accountability has arrived.

The Red Cross report -- published this week in its entirety for the first time by the New York Review of Books -- is a stunning account of how the Bush administration spat on our laws, traditions and ideals. I realize that many Americans, given the scope of the economic crisis and the ambitions of the new administration, would rather look forward than revisit the past. The business of torture, however, is too unspeakable to be left unresolved.

After years of stonewalling, the Bush administration in October 2006 allowed the Red Cross to interview 14 Guantanamo detainees who had previously been held and interrogated in the CIA's secret prisons. Among them were several men who almost certainly played major roles in planning and executing the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, including Khalid Sheik Mohammed and Ramzi Binalshib. Others, such as Abu Zubaydah, now seem to have had less involvement in the attacks than once believed.

The 14 men told remarkably similar stories. After being arrested -- whether in Pakistan, Dubai, Thailand or Djibouti -- they were blindfolded, shackled and flown to an interrogation center that all of them identified as being in Afghanistan. This was probably the prison facility at the U.S.-run Bagram air base north of Kabul. Twelve of the 14 said they were tortured.

Three of the detainees reported being subjected to suffocation by water -- the torture known as waterboarding. Abu Zubaydah's account of the experience is quoted at length in the report: "I was put on what looked like a hospital bed, and strapped down very tightly with belts. A black cloth was then placed over my face and the interrogators used a mineral water bottle to pour water on the cloth so that I could not breathe. After a few minutes the cloth was removed and the bed was rotated into an upright position. The pressure of the straps on my wounds caused severe pain. I vomited. The bed was then again lowered to a horizontal position and the same torture carried out."

Ten of the detainees said they were forced to stand in an excruciatingly painful position for days at a time, with their hands chained to a bar above their heads. If you don't believe that's torture, try it -- and see if you last five minutes. One detainee, Walid Bin Attash, had an artificial leg, which he said his CIA jailers sometimes removed to make the "stress standing position" more agonizing.

Nine of the men said they were subjected to daily beatings in the first weeks of their detention. Abu Zubaydah said he was sometimes confined for long periods in boxes designed to constrict his

movement -- one of them tall and narrow, the other so short that he could only squat in an awkward and painful position.

According to the report, some of the tortures were aided and abetted by "health personnel" whom the detainees believed were doctors or psychologists.

This is barbarity with an ugly sheen of bureaucracy. Mohammed told the Red Cross that before he was waterboarded, one of his CIA interrogators bragged of having received "the green light from Washington" to give the prisoner "a hard time." Who, precisely, was in the chain of command that gave the order for torture?

Who are the "health personnel" who monitored the suffocation sessions and the "stress position" tortures, at times suggesting a pause or a resumption of the agony? Who are the CIA torturers? Who are the Air Force officers at Bagram who might have disapproved of what the CIA was doing but took no steps to stop it?

I have believed all along that we urgently need to conduct a thorough investigation into the Bush administration's moral and legal transgressions. Now I am convinced that some kind of "truth commission" process isn't enough. Torture -- even the torture of evil men -- is a crime. It deserves not just to be known, but to be punished.

From George W. Bush on down, individuals decided to sanction, commit and tolerate the practice of torture. They took pains to paper this vile enterprise with rationalizations and justifications, but they knew it was wrong. So do we.

eugenerobinson@washpost.com

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