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EDITORIAL

On Torture and American Values

Once upon a time, it was the United States that urged all nations to obey the letter and the spirit of international treaties and protect human rights and liberties. American leaders denounced secret prisons where people were held without charges, tortured and killed. And the people in much of the world, if not their governments, respected the United States for its values.

The Bush administration has dishonored that history and squandered that respect. As an article on this newspaper's front page last week laid out in disturbing detail, President Bush and his aides have not only condoned torture and abuse at secret prisons, but they have conducted a systematic campaign to mislead Congress, the American people and the world about those policies.

After the attacks of 9/11, Mr. Bush authorized the creation of extralegal detention camps where Central Intelligence Agency operatives were told to extract information from prisoners who were captured and held in secret. Some of their methods — simulated drownings, extreme ranges of heat and cold, prolonged stress positions and isolation — had been classified as torture for decades by civilized nations. The administration clearly knew this; the C.I.A. modeled its techniques on the dungeons of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Soviet Union.

The White House could never acknowledge that. So its lawyers concocted documents that redefined “torture” to neatly exclude the things American jailers were doing and hid the papers from Congress and the American people. Under Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, Mr. Bush's loyal enabler, the Justice Department even declared that those acts did not violate the lower standard of “cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.”

That allowed the White House to claim that it did not condone torture, and to stampede Congress into passing laws that shielded the interrogators who abused prisoners, and the men who ordered them to do it, from any kind of legal accountability.

Mr. Bush and his aides were still clinging to their rationalizations at the end of last week. The president declared that Americans do not torture prisoners and that Congress had been fully briefed on his detention policies.

Neither statement was true — at least in what the White House once scorned as the “reality-based community” — and Senator John Rockefeller, chairman of the Intelligence Committee, was right to be furious. He demanded all of the “opinions of the Justice Department analyzing the legality” of detention and interrogation policies. Lawmakers, who for too long have been bullied and intimidated by the White House, should rewrite the Detainee Treatment Act and the Military Commissions Act to conform with actual American laws and values.

For the rest of the nation, there is an immediate question: Is this really who we are?

Is this the country whose president declared, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall,” and then managed the

collapse of Communism with minimum bloodshed and maximum dignity in the twilight of the 20th century? Or is this a nation that tortures human beings and then concocts legal sophistries to confuse the world and avoid accountability before American voters?

Truly banning the use of torture would not jeopardize American lives; experts in these matters generally agree that torture produces false confessions. Restoring the rule of law to Guantánamo Bay would not set terrorists free; the truly guilty could be tried for their crimes in a way that does not mock American values.

Clinging to the administration's policies will only cause further harm to America's global image and to our legal system. It also will add immeasurably to the risk facing any man or woman captured while wearing America's uniform or serving in its intelligence forces.

This is an easy choice.

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