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What if Cheney's Right?

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By Richard Cohen
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Blogger Alert: I have written a column in defense of Dick Cheney. I know how upsetting this will be to some Cheney critics, and I count myself as one, who think -- in respectful paraphrase of what Mary McCarthy said about Lillian Hellman -- that everything he says is a lie, including the *ands* and the *thes*. Yet I have to wonder whether what he is saying now is the truth -- i.e., torture works.

In some sense, this is an arcane point since the United States insists it will not torture anymore -- not that, the Bush people quickly add, it ever did. Torture is a moral abomination, and President Obama is right to restate American opposition to it. But where I reserve a soupçon of doubt is over the question of whether "enhanced interrogation techniques" actually work. That they do not is a matter of absolute conviction among those on the political left, who seem to think that the CIA tortured suspected terrorists just for the hell of it.

Cheney, though, is adamant that the very measures that are now deemed illegal did work and that, furthermore, doing away with them has made the country less safe. Cheney [said](#) this most recently on Sunday, on CBS's "[Face the Nation](#)." "Those policies were responsible for saving lives," he told Bob Schieffer. In effect, Cheney poses a hard, hard question: Is it more immoral to torture than it is to fail to prevent the deaths of thousands?

Cheney is a one-man credibility gap. In the past, he has said, "We know they [the Iraqis] have biological and chemical weapons," when it turned out we knew nothing of the sort. He [insisted](#) that "the evidence is overwhelming" that al-Qaeda had been in high-level contact with Saddam Hussein's regime when the "evidence" was virtually nonexistent. And he repeatedly asserted that Iraq had a menacing nuclear weapons program. As a used-car dealer, he would have no return customers.

Still, every dog has his day, and Cheney is barking up a storm on the efficacy of what can colloquially be called torture. He says he knows of two CIA memos that support his contention that the harsh interrogation methods worked and that many lives were saved. "That's what's in those memos," he told Schieffer. They talk "specifically about different attack planning that was underway and how it was stopped."

Cheney says he once had the memos in his files and has since asked that they be released. He's got a point. After all, this is not merely some political catfight conducted by bloggers, although it is a bit of that, too. Inescapably, it is about life and death -- not ideology, but people hurling themselves from the burning World Trade Center. If Cheney is right, then let the debate begin: What to do about enhanced interrogation methods? Should they be banned across the board, always and forever? Can we talk about what is and not just what ought to be?

In a similar vein, can we also find out what Nancy Pelosi knew and when she knew it? If she did

indeed know about waterboarding back in 2003, that would hardly make her a war criminal. But if she knew and insists otherwise, that would make her one of those people who will not acknowledge that the immediate post-Sept. 11 atmosphere allowed for methods that now seem abhorrent. Certain Democratic politicians remind me of what Oscar Levant supposedly said of Doris Day: "I knew [her] before she was a virgin." They have no memory of who they used to be.

Back in my college days, there was much late-night discussion about the "free man" -- not politically free, mind you, but free of bourgeois cultural restraints. (The once-important writer Jean Genet, a former petty criminal and prostitute, was often cited.) In political terms, Cheney has been a free man ever since he eschewed any presidential ambitions. He became the most impolitic of politicians and continues in that role, taking neither a vow of penitence nor a vow of silence in his vice presidential afterlife. He says the issues are too important for him to be, as is traditional, mum.

He is right about that. The run-up to the disastrous Iraq war was notable for its smothering lack of debate. That served us poorly then and it would serve us poorly now if people who know something about the utility, not to mention the morality, of enhanced interrogation techniques keep their mouths shut. The Obama administration ought to call Cheney's bluff, if it is that, and release the memos. If even a stopped clock is right twice a day, this could be Cheney's time.

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