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Say It, America: This Is Not Who We Are

Here we go again. That is my numbed but no longer disbelieving reaction to reports that even after Abu Ghraib and the official rejection of the "torture memo" penned by John Yoo that authorized any kind of force as long as it did not cause death or major organ failure, the Bush administration turned around and secretly authorized CIA interrogations using head-slapping, exposure to cold and water-boarding, even when used in combination. And here come the semantics from a president who once prided himself on plain talk - "This government does not torture." No, because head-slapping, exposure to cold and convincing suspects that they are about to drown in a technique that even America's strongest soldiers cannot withstand for more than two minutes does not, in his view, constitute torture. Indeed, truly incredibly, according to one of the newly leaked opinions, these techniques do not even constitute "cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment." Solzhenitsyn's reports of the Soviet gulag in the 1970s did not feature the horrifically creative torture techniques practiced in places like Argentina and Chile during the dirty war.

Most of what he talked about was being beaten and exposed to the frigid temperatures of Siberia. In those days we Americans did not dance around trying to decide whether such treatment constituted torture. We just knew it was wrong. And as has often been reported, many of the techniques our CIA agents are using now come from the ways we condition our soldiers to resist torture by lawless enemies if they are captured. We now seem to have no trouble accepting the moral equivalence of what they do to us and what we do to them. We've had these debates before. The difference this time, supposedly, is that we are not asking our soldiers to implement these "interrogation practices," but rather experienced CIA interrogators, who willingly signed up for the job and have a proven track record of extracting information. This is the world of shadowy terrorist networks and equally shadowy intelligence networks; normal rules don't apply. Back in the 1960s, we used to provide CIA officers with a free pass for attempted assassinations of rulers we didn't like, until the American people recoiled and ventures like the effort to blow up Fidel Castro via his cigar made us a laughingstock. The CIA represents America just as much as any other arm of government. Indeed, individual CIA officers are determined not to do anything that is not explicitly legally authorized, which is precisely why the administration has had to issue official legal opinions specifying that techniques like waterboarding are permissible in the first place. Enough. In the spring of 2004, I wrote on this page of my anguish traveling through airports with the pictures of Abu Ghraib staring out at me from every newstand, showing the blue passport of which I have always been proud and knowing that the official, the immigration officer, even the airline clerk was connecting that passport with torture. Three years later, after men like Senator John McCain, a former prisoner of war, led the fight against these techniques, joined by scores of former generals and admirals, indeed after Congress finally banned them for military interrogations, we

are still engaging in them. The only difference is that we don't have pictures of prisoners being nearly drowned, slapped around or sitting naked in icy cells. Such pictures would be less dramatic than the twisted escapades of Abu Ghraib, but even more shameful, because they would represent the official policy of America as a nation. I can argue why ruling out torture and humiliating and degrading treatment is strongly in American interests, how interrogation of this sort rarely works. I can explain how the damage it does to us in the world far outweighs any specific information that we get. Indeed, even if we get information that actually succeeds in stopping a particular attack today, we are breeding legions of new terrorists tomorrow. I can also point out how seriously we endanger our own soldiers when they are captured abroad. I can talk about how fundamentally we degrade ourselves, beginning with the men and women ordered to carry out such treatment and ending with our very identity as a nation. As President Theodore Roosevelt said in his 1906 State of the Union address, "No man can take part in the torture of a human being without having his own moral nature permanently lowered." I can make those arguments. I believe them. But what I really want is an America that will simply stand up and say, as President George W. Bush did when he saw the Abu Ghraib photographs, that this is not who we are. It is time for a president who means it.

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