

The following text may be printed, copy/pasted, or downloaded and emailed.

Excruciating stain

U.S. officials' adoption of torture as an acceptable tactic in war will tarnish this nation for generations

Editorial
Atlanta-Journal Constitution
December 8, 2004

What does this country stand for? What makes us different from our enemies?

Well, unlike our enemies, we Americans supposedly abide by the rules of civilized behavior. And among the rules that we have solemnly pledged to honor, both in international treaties as well as in our own laws, is a prohibition against torture. We Americans believe — supposedly — that torture is a barbaric act that has no place in a civilized world.

That's what we say. But it is not what we have done.

Ever since Sept. 11, 2001, the U.S. government has claimed to honor the Geneva Conventions in its handling of prisoners, and it has dismissed allegations of torture as unfounded. Whenever evidence of torture by U.S. personnel has surfaced, at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison and elsewhere, officials have dismissed them as aberrations.

However, the accumulated evidence to the contrary is now overwhelming. It is now becoming distressingly clear that U.S. officials have adopted a conscious, if secret, policy in which torture is an acceptable tactic. It is also becoming clear that the horrors that took place at Abu Ghraib were not aberrations by "a few bad apples" but merely unapproved extensions of what was approved policy throughout the U.S. military prison system.

It has become equally clear that the responsibility for that policy reaches to the very top of the chain of command, to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, to the White House and to President Bush himself. It was White House Counsel Alberto Gonzalez, after all, who argued in a secret legal opinion that contrary to treaty and federal law, the United States was not bound to honor the Geneva Conventions. And it was Bush who has now nominated Gonzalez to serve as attorney general, the top law enforcement position in the country.

It is certainly possible to envision specific, rare circumstances in which specific lifesaving information is sought from a specific person, and in which torture is approved as a last-ditch means to acquire that information. But that is not what has happened. Information filtering out of the military prison system overseas indicates that once the stern and absolute prohibition against torture was weakened by top officials, the attitude quickly spread.

For example, FBI counter-terrorism agents, working at the secret U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, were so shocked at the unnecessary and counterproductive brutality being used at the facility that they reported the problem to their superiors in a written report that has now been made public. In one case, agents reported seeing one detainee "after he had been subjected to intense isolation for over three months . . . totally isolated in a cell that was always flooded with light. By late November, the detainee was evidencing behavior consistent with extreme psychological trauma . . . talking to nonexistent people, reported hearing voices [and] crouching in a corner of the cell covered with a sheet."

What kind of accurate intelligence could a man in such a state possibly provide? None.

Yes, these are dangerous times. But it is always easy to abide by the rules as long it doesn't cost you anything.

Years from now, our children and grandchildren will look back at this period and wonder how we let this happen.

And we will not have an answer for them.