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Official abuse

The United States must do more than merely disavow the use of torture on military detainees.

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Last week, Central Intelligence Director Porter Goss could not assure members of the Senate Armed Services Committee that interrogation methods since the terrorist attacks of 2001 always fell within the bounds of the nation's laws against torture.

Earlier this month, the Pentagon reported that abuse by American troops had caused the deaths of at least four prisoners in U.S. custody in Iraq and Afghanistan. More recently, Army and Navy officials acknowledged that homicide is suspected or had been confirmed in at least 26 prisoner deaths.

Goss did say during the congressional hearing that techniques employed "at this time" to squeeze information out of suspected terrorists are legally permissible. But that is cold comfort in light of reports that American troops and intelligence officers routinely, in the name of homeland security, cross the line that separates humane from inhumane treatment.

If soldiers in the war on terror are confused regarding the United States' policy on torture, it's understandable. In 2002, U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, at the time President Bush's chief White House counsel, and other administration officials drafted memorandums that seemed to countenance torture in some instances. The Justice Department disavowed the memo last year after a loud public outcry.

Goss insisted to Congress that, "I can assure you that I know of no instances where the intelligence community is outside the law on this. And I know for a fact that torture is not productive. That's not professional interrogation. We don't do torture." Yet the director defended the CIA's policy of carrying out "renditions," the practice of kidnapping suspecting terrorists and shipping them off to countries such as Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia, where authorities have no qualms about torture.

Administration officials said they do not kidnap and deliver suspects to their native land without the assurance they won't be tortured. But the administration is not that gullible, and neither are the American people.

The barbaric treatment of prisoners, whether in Iraq's notorious Abu Ghraib prison or at the detention center for terror suspects at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, undermines the United States' stature in the world.

Mark Danner, author of *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib and the War on Terror*, will be in Houston April 3 at the Rothko Chapel's presentation of its Oscar Romero Award in support of human rights advocacy. Danner does not hesitate to state the obvious: The use of torture weakens America's claim to the moral high ground as it promotes global democracy: "It's illegal, it's wrong, it's morally corrosive, it's politically corrosive, and we shouldn't do it."

Top administration and military officials like to assert that abuses of foreign detainees result from eroded discipline among underlings rather than flawed policy. But a general and several colonels at Guantanamo, the Associated Press reports, are being investigated for sexual misconduct. These are the officers in charge of holding and interrogating terrorist suspects. It's no wonder the prison camp's discipline and moral climate have been found lacking.

The United States must do more than just politely demur on the subject of torture. If the president abhors torture, he should end the policy of kidnapping suspects and placing them in the custody of barbarous, tyrannical regimes. If the Republican leadership in Congress feels moral outrage at the abuses that have taken place at U.S. military outposts, Congress should investigate and then outlaw the practice.