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U.S. has Sanctioned Torture For Far Too long

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As the United Nations intensifies its scrutiny of torture practices in Iraq, many Americans feel outrage and confusion.

How could this have happened? The truth lies in the realities that led to the Katrina disaster. The horrors are not new, but long-term and deep-rooted.

The photographs of Abu Ghraib torture practices left many of us with a chilling sense of déjà vu. Anyone who survived torture in Latin America or lost a loved one to death squads there, remembers these techniques. We also remember the U.S. participants. Although our government leaders insist that the recent abuses were acts of a few "bad apples" - young MPs out of control - we can only shake our heads. We have heard it all before. While our young soldiers face prison time for following orders, those who authorized and ordered the torture continue to violate our laws with full impunity. Why?

Given the extraordinary flow of disclosures, confirming the use of identical U.S. torture practices throughout Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo, the "bad apple" defense is coy at best. It is impossible for so many soldiers to dream up identical techniques by coincidence. We are dealing with official policy, not individual excess. Legal responsibility goes all the way to the top.

We must also remember that these horrific practices were not invented during the war against terror. Throughout Latin America, secretly held prisoners were subjected to raging dogs, excruciating positions, simulated drownings, long-term sleep and food deprivation, blasting noises and terrifying threats.

U.S. responsibility was hardly limited to funding and training military death squads. In many cases, U.S. intelligence agents visited cells, observed battered prisoners and gave advice or asked questions. Instead of insisting on humane treatment, these agents simply left the detainees to their fates.

Worse yet, many notorious torturers were on the CIA payroll as informants. I ought to know. My husband, a Mayan resistance leader, was brutally tortured for two years by Guatemalan officials serving as such "assets." The "water-pit" technique referred to in Afghanistan appears in his files, too. Eventually, he was either thrown from a helicopter or dismembered. Within six days of his capture, the CIA knew he was in the hands of its own people, yet continued payments and kept the matter secret even from our Congress. My husband's life could have been saved.

These practices have been developed through the decades. The iconic photograph of the Abu Ghraib detainee, hooded and wired and standing on a small box, depicts a position known to intelligence officials as "The Vietnam."

Since these torture techniques constitute obvious policy, and many were specifically authorized, why are our top-level officials not under indictment? The Fourth Geneva Convention protects non-POWs, including saboteurs and insurgents. Such people may be tried and imprisoned, but not tortured. Our criminal laws make it a felony to conspire to torture a detainee abroad.

We are repeatedly told that we must permit torture to maintain our national security. True? Experts agree that torture does not yield reliable intelligence because the victims will say anything

to stop the pain. Tried-and-true police methods yield far better results. Worse yet, as military people like Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and former Secretary of State Colin Powell have said, we greatly endanger our own servicemen and women by discarding anti-torture protections. By creating rage and hatred against Americans, our troops face bombs instead of tossed bouquets. As that rage increases, the risk of another attack here at home escalates dramatically. This is our country and our responsibility. The time has come to roll up our sleeves and clean house.

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