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We Can't Remain Silent

BOB HERBERT (Op-Ed)
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At dinner on a rainy night in Manhattan this week, I listened to a retired admiral and a retired general speak about the pain they've personally felt over the torture and abuse scandal that has spread like a virus through some sectors of the military.

During the dinner and in follow-up interviews, Rear Adm. John Hutson, who is now president of the Franklin Pierce Law Center in Concord, N.H., and Brig. Gen. James Cullen, a lawyer in private practice in New York, said they believed that both the war effort and the military itself have been seriously undermined by official policies that encouraged the abuse of prisoners.

Both men said they were unable to remain silent as institutions that they served loyally for decades, and which they continue to love without reservation, are being damaged by patterns of conduct that fly in the face of core values that most members of the military try mightily to uphold.

"At some point," said General Cullen, "I had to say: 'Wait a minute. We cannot go along with this.'"

The two retired officers have lent their support to an extraordinary lawsuit that seeks to hold Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld ultimately accountable for policies that have given rise to torture and other forms of prisoner abuse. And last September they were among a group of eight retired admirals and generals who wrote a letter to President Bush urging him to create an independent 9/11-type commission to fully investigate the problem of prisoner abuse from the top to the bottom of the command structure.

Admiral Hutson, who served as the Navy's judge advocate general from 1997 to 2000, said he felt sick the first time he saw the photos of soldiers abusing detainees at Abu Ghraib prison. "I felt like somebody in my family had died," he said.

Even before that, he had been concerned by the Bush administration's decision to deny the protections of the Geneva Conventions to some detainees, and by the way prisoners at Guantánamo Bay were being processed and treated. He said that when the scandal at Abu Ghraib broke, "I knew in my soul that it was going to be bigger than that, that we had just seen the tip of the iceberg and that it was going to get worse and worse and worse."

The letter to President Bush emphasized the wide scope of the problem, noting that there were "dozens of well-documented allegations of torture, abuse and otherwise questionable detention practices" involving prisoners in U.S. custody. It said:

"These reports have implicated both U.S. military and intelligence agencies, ranging from junior enlisted members to senior command officials, as well as civilian contractors. ... No fewer than a hundred criminal, military and administrative inquiries have been launched into apparently improper or unlawful U.S. practices related to detention and interrogation. Given the range of individuals and locations involved in these reports, it is simply no longer possible to view these allegations as a few instances of an isolated problem."

Admiral Hutson and General Cullen have worked closely with a New York-based group, Human Rights First, which, along with the American Civil Liberties Union, filed the lawsuit against Mr. Rumsfeld. A report released this week by Human Rights First said that the number of detainees

in U.S. custody in Iraq and Afghanistan has grown to more than 11,000, and that the level of secrecy surrounding American detention operations has intensified.

Burgeoning detainee populations and increased secrecy are primary ingredients for more, not less, prisoner abuse.

One of the many concerns expressed by Admiral Hutson and General Cullen was the effect of the torture and abuse scandal on members of the military who have had nothing to do with it. "I think it does stain the honor of people who didn't participate in it at all," said Admiral Hutson. "People in the military who find that kind of behavior abhorrent are painted with the same broad brush."

General Cullen, who has served as chief judge of the Army's Court of Criminal Appeals, spoke in terms of grief. "You feel sorrow," he said, "because you know there are so many servicemen and women out there who want to do the right thing, who are doing tough jobs every day. And to see these events blacken their names and call into question their whole mission just makes me sad. Very, very sad."