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A Conversation With Senator John McCain

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CHARLIE ROSE: You're at odds with the administration, or certainly with the vice president, and you have got to believe that the vice president wouldn't be ahead of the president on this, on the issue of torture. And you know something about torture.

Tell me how you came to the conclusion you did and why it's important.

JOHN MCCAIN: I travel a lot around the world, usually at your expense. Every place I go, Abu Ghraib and prisoner abuse is a huge issue. I spoke to the student union at Oxford University. The majority of their concern was, why do you abuse people? Al Jazeera -- you know, this is, as we all know, this is a battle militarily, but it's also a battle of, if I dare I use, hearts and minds of people throughout the world. And we are being very badly damaged by this.

But more importantly than that, is that we are different than all the others. Quite often, well, they're just a bunch of terrorists and they'd do the same to us. Are we the same as them? Of course not. And it's not about them. It's about us. It's about us. And from a practical standpoint, torture doesn't work. It doesn't work. If you inflict enough pain on somebody, they'll tell you whatever they think you want, they want...

CHARLIE ROSE: To stop the pain.

JOHN MCCAIN: ... to hear, to stop the pain. But most importantly, we've got to have clear guidelines for the men and women in the military who are doing the interrogation, so that we don't engage in it. Because, by the way, we were a signatory during the Reagan administration to a treaty that says we will not engage in torture.

CHARLIE ROSE: So what should they do about Guantanamo Bay? What should they do about all those people we don't even know where they are?

JOHN MCCAIN: In the case of Guantanamo Bay, I think at some point, there has to be some adjudication, some tribunal, some kind of a way of judging their cases. You just can't keep people in prison indefinitely.

Do I mean they get a full-court trial with every protection that Americans -- obviously not. But there needs to be something done to adjudicate their cases.

As far as a terrorist is concerned, if we captured a guy and he had a bomb in it hand, and his buddies were someplace else and they were about to blow up the Pentagon, then I as president of the United States, if I were president of the United States, I'd say, do whatever is necessary to find it out. But then, I would take the responsibility for doing it. I'd say, well, look, I had to do this because it was clear and compelling that a whole bunch of -- thousands of Americans were going to die.

But that's the responsibility the president takes on. That's far different from saying, we're going to take people to a foreign country and do what we want with them.

CHARLIE ROSE: Has anybody been held accountable for Abu Ghraib?

JOHN MCCAIN: I think that some people have been. Probably not...

CHARLIE ROSE: At the operational level, right down the people who were...?

JOHN MCCAIN: No. And I also have never gotten a satisfactory answer about the so-called ghost prisoners that they were moving around the prison. Privates and corporals don't do that.