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No Torture Sen. McCain's Principled Stand Pays Off

Editorial

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It seems that finally, in response to vigorous prodding from Congress, the U.S. government is going to go on record as opposed to torture.

If it weren't for the fact that this newspaper was founded in 1786, and carries on its masthead the words, "One of America's Great Newspapers," it would be appropriate to comment on that tardy action with one word -- the popular, populous "Duh."

Even to the hardest-nosed American, entirely uninterested in human rights arguments, there are two points against torture that are indisputable that should rule it out as American practice. One is that if Americans employ it as a tool against our enemies, there is nothing that will stand up as an argument against our enemies using it against American prisoners who fall into their hands.

This was the argument that America used during the Vietnam War with South Vietnamese who were being very hard in interrogating Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regular forces who were falling into their hands. As increasing numbers of American pilots and soldiers began falling into the hands of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, the United States had no respectable argument to use to insist that they be given treatment in accord with the Geneva Conventions on Treatment of Prisoners of War unless ARVN and Viet Cong personnel were given corresponding treatment by us and the South Vietnamese authorities. It more or less worked, and people like Sen. John McCain came out alive.

The other more cynical but still indisputable argument is that torture simply doesn't work in extracting useful information from prisoners. Someone who is tortured operates according to one guiding principle: get it to stop. Tell them anything that will make them stop, true or false.

These two points are operable, in addition to all the others against torture, including its effect on the torturer, the perishability of intelligence and the fact that the rest of the world lumps it with the death penalty in the category of unspeakable practices to which Americans seem addicted.

Therefore, Sen. McCain was correct in pushing the Senate to condemn torture; Rep. John Murtha was correct in guiding the same measure through the House of Representatives. President Bush will be correct to sign the measure in the end, although he has given throughout the definite impression that he -- and even more so his sidekick, Vice President Dick Cheney -- would rather have liked not to have the blanket condemnation of torture on record.

The pledge will now need to be put into action, throughout America's armed forces and the CIA. Guantanamo Bay would be a good place to start.