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CIA 'Black Sites': A Black Eye for U.S.

Peter Brookes (op-ed)
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A key factor in planning any covert operation is full consideration of "blowback" - the painful consequences of an "op" gone bad. This time, the CIA is stinging from the "blowback" of last week's revelation that it has been playing warden to a string of secret overseas terrorist prisons.

With human-rights groups howling "torture" and "gulag," the International Red Cross and the European Union seeking answers, and the Bush administration saying little, the effect on public opinion at home and America's image abroad will be painful.

How do we recover from this newest black eye? By taking action. Close the "black site" jailhouses, transfer detainees to established facilities such as Guantánamo Bay, and pass/implement legislation in the spirit of Sen. John McCain's "Anti-Torture Provisions."

The "black" facilities made a great deal of sense immediately after the 9/11 attacks - nabbing al-Qaeda terrorists, quickly gathering critical intelligence, and preventing future terrorist strikes. But they've outlived their usefulness.

Back then, the threat was real: In December 2001, for instance, Singapore broke up a bombing plot against U.S. ships and sailors and U.S., Australian, British and Israeli embassies by the al-Qaeda affiliate Jemaah Islamiya.

Most of the commentariat agreed that, in that aftermath, the CIA did a terrific job in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Its quickness in neutralizing al-Qaeda assets worldwide undoubtedly disrupted additional attacks on the homeland and American interests overseas.

But with high-tech, high-security facilities such as the U.S. naval prison at Gitmo now available, these clandestine holding facilities have lost their original purpose. Shutter them and move the detainees to places where they can be held and fully interrogated for their intelligence value.

Sen. McCain (R., Ariz.) is on to something as well. McCain's so-called "Anti-Torture Provisions" (presented as amendments to this year's defense spending bill) set clear guidelines (finally!) for the treatment of enemy detainees. The move has wide bipartisan support in Congress.

This commonsense legislation would: (a) establish the U.S. Army Field Manual on Intelligence Interrogation (FM 34-52) as the standard for detainee interrogation; and (b) prohibit cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment for those under U.S. detention.

McCain, a prisoner of war during the Vietnam War, realizes that - contrary to popular belief - the use of extreme measures (e.g., torture and humiliation) hurts both our ability to gather intelligence and our image abroad, especially in the Muslim world.

Highly coercive techniques actually prevent our interrogators from acquiring accurate information desperately needed by battlefield commanders and policymakers. Detainees will often say almost anything to get the interrogator to stop the torture/humiliation.

Moreover, McCain rightly notes that prisoner abuse "has executed a terrible toll on us in the war of ideas." Considering past mistakes such as Abu Ghraib, it's time to end this cycle of abuse

scandals and unequivocally declare in law that we don't support torture or similar interrogation techniques, even in times of war.

While some argue that the issue of "cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment" needs greater definition in the legislation, the McCain rules provide U.S. military personnel with interrogation guidelines that have been much-needed for far too long.

Others argue that the legislation usurps the President's right to provide for American national security, but the Constitution gives Congress the explicit right to make rules for the nation's armed forces.

If anything, the McCain measures should cover all personnel involved in detention/interrogation, including the CIA and U.S. government contractors.

If congressional leaders manage to squelch the McCain proposals, they'll send an inadvertent but regrettable message abroad: Torture is OK by the American people. That's wrong, and it endangers America's security, credibility and interests abroad, including those of our troops.

With memories of Abu Ghraib still fresh, and with new allegations of secret CIA prisons, the Congress and the Bush administration can't move too quickly in setting clear, consistent rules for where and how we hold and treat detainees in our custody.

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