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Torture and our national soul

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The International Red Cross report charging that interrogation practices used on prisoners at the U.S. base at Guantanamo are “tantamount to torture” can be sloughed off only at the peril of what remains of our good name internationally and of the health of our national soul, if nations can be said to have souls.

The Pentagon is denying that anything is amiss in the treatment of the suspected terrorists who have been held at the base, some for three years now, and in fact other independent auditors have come from the base reporting that conditions there, while hardly cushy, appear to be within lawful bounds.

Let’s fervently hope those denials are just, but a report as chilling as the Red Cross’s, from an organization so experienced and sober, cannot safely be dismissed as just more international hectoring born of opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq or an irresolvable he said/she said standoff.

As The New York Times recently reported, the Red Cross report, based on interviews and an inspection conducted last summer, details instances of prisoners being forced to kneel for long periods of time, sealed in cold rooms with noise blasting them and held naked for extended periods. Especially disturbing are claims that military physicians have aided interrogators by revealing prisoners’ vulnerabilities.

OK, none of this is rack-and-thumbscrews stuff. But the Geneva Convention governing such matters is clear. Prisoners who do not cooperate with their interrogators “may not be threatened, insulted or exposed to any unpleasant and disadvantageous treatment of any kind.”

The Red Cross judges that the practices at Guantanamo are “an intentional system of cruel, unusual and degrading treatment and a form of torture.”

The Red Cross’s claims gain provisional credibility from the fact that, using the shock of the 9/11 terrorist attack as an excuse, the Bush administration has been cutting U.S. and international legal corners wherever it finds itself inconvenienced — fudging habeas corpus standards, inventing gimmicky claims against the applicability of the Geneva rules and short-changing customary civil liberty protections.

The appalling misbehaviors against prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad are widely held to have begun in Guantanamo and migrated to Iraq, where already questionable techniques worsened into outright torture. The behaviors in both places are precipitates of an atmosphere charged with self-indulgent rationalizations by the White House counsel, Defense secretary and attorney general.

International legal and human rights monitors are becoming increasingly concerned about U.S. treatment of prisoners and impatient with Washington’s apparent official indifference. The administration contents itself with perfunctory denials and a partisan Congress is in default in its oversight responsibilities.

In time, we will have to answer to the world's concerns, if not in any legal forum then in the court of public opinion. But far more importantly, we will have to answer to ourselves.