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Tortured principles

Editorial
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THE INTRODUCTION to the State Department's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2004 cites as a guiding principle the words of President Bush in his second inaugural address: last month: "The survival of liberty in our land depends on the success of liberty in other lands." This is a fitting justification for the State Department's comprehensive reporting on human rights abuses around the world. Anyone reading these accounts of torture in Iran and North Korea, however, cannot help recalling that some of those sadistic practices have been approved for use in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib prison by senior US officials and that under the rubric of "extraordinary rendition," the CIA has shipped terrorist suspects to countries such as Syria, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, where the suspects are tortured in ways that the State Department has faithfully documented.

This is not to say that the compilers of the State Department's country-by-country reports are performing a useless task. On the contrary, their willingness to hold to account American clients as well as governments defined by Washington as rogue regimes reflects the beneficial influence of nongovernmental human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Physicians for Human Rights. These groups have taught politicians and government bureaucrats that it is not only ethical but also good policy to take the side of the dissident who is being doused with cold water in a rat-infested cell and whipped with electric cables.

But a politics rooted in human rights must accept the principle that those rights have little meaning if they are not universal. If it is wrong for the Syrian secret police to torture someone apprehended in Syria, then it is no less wrong for US authorities to send a terrorist suspect to Syria to be tortured by interrogators posing questions suggested by US intelligence officers.

Just as the logic of the Geneva Conventions protecting soldiers and civilians captured in wartime rests upon the self-interest implicit in obeying reciprocal rules of war, the State Department's right to chastise foreign regimes for practicing torture evaporates when the White House, the Justice Department, or the Defense Department issues guidelines, authorizations, and justifications for torturing people who are held incommunicado as terrorist suspects -- uncharged but categorized as unlawful enemy combatants.

The United States should be able to criticize the barbarity of regimes in Sudan or Burma -- not merely so that we Americans may feel good but to alleviate suffering and save lives. If Bush would reflect on his tolerance of torture, he might see that what he called the success of liberty in other lands depends on the survival of liberty here in America.