

Dick Cheney Was Lying About Torture

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Eliana
Johnson



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It's official: torture doesn't work. Waterboarding Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of 9/11, did not in fact "produce the intelligence that allowed us to get Osama bin Laden," as former Vice President Dick Cheney asserted in 2011. Those are among the central findings of the Senate Intelligence Committee report on CIA interrogation and detention after 9/11.

The report's executive summary is expected to be released Tuesday. After reviewing thousands of the CIA's own documents, the committee has concluded that torture was ineffective as an intelligence-gathering technique. Torture produced little information of value, and what little it did produce could've been gained through humane, legal methods that uphold American ideals.

I had long since come to that conclusion myself. As special agent in charge of the criminal investigation task force with investigators and intelligence personnel at Guantanamo Bay, Afghanistan, and Iraq, I was privy to the information provided by Khalid Sheik Mohammed. I was aware of no valuable information that came from waterboarding. And the Senate Intelligence Committee—which had access to all CIA documents related to the "enhanced interrogation" program—has concluded that abusive techniques didn't help the hunt for Bin Laden. Cheney's claim that the frequent waterboarding of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed "produced phenomenal results for us" is simply false.



The self-defeating stupidity of torture might come as news to Americans who've heard again and again from Cheney and other political leaders that torture "worked." Professional interrogators, however, couldn't be less surprised. We know that legal, rapport-building interrogation techniques are the best way to obtain intelligence, and that torture tends to solicit unreliable information that sets back investigations.

Yes, torture makes people talk—but what they say is often untrue. Seeking to stop the pain, people subjected to torture tend to say what they believe their interrogators want to hear.

The report is essential because it makes clear the legal, moral, and strategic costs of torture. President Obama and congressional leaders should use this opportunity to push for legislation that solidifies the ban on torture and cruel treatment. While current law prohibits these acts, US officials employed strained legal arguments to authorize abuse.

A law could take various forms: a codification of the president's 2009 executive order banning torture, for example, or an expansion of the 2005 Detainee Treatment Act so that key protections in it would apply to the CIA as well as the military. However it's designed, a new law would help the country stay true to its ideals during times of crisis and guard against a return to the "dark side."

And dark it was. Terms like "waterboarding" and "enhanced interrogation" obscure the brutal, sometimes bloody, reality. It was about the delivery of pain. The U.S. government authorized previously taboo techniques, which—along with a take-the-gloves-off message coming from the top—led to even greater horrors. You can draw a line from the "enhanced interrogation" to the barbarism of Abu Ghraib.

The ostensible purpose of torture was to save lives, but it has had the exact opposite effect. Torture was a PR bonanza for enemies of the United States. It enabled—and, in fact, is still enabling—al Qaeda and its allies to attract more fighters, more sympathizers, and more money.

Some have argued against releasing the report because they predict that it will spark anti-American anger around the world. Such a possibility, however, is an argument not against the kind of transparency and Congressional oversight inherent to a well-functioning democracy; it's an argument against torture. Indeed, by employing such an argument, people are implicitly acknowledging that torture saps the country's credibility and threatens its national security.

Over the coming days, you'll be hearing numerous torture defenders claim it kept Americans safe. Don't believe them. Many of us charged with the mission of getting information out of terrorists didn't resort to using torture. Like many Americans, we didn't want our government to use torture, and we hope it never does again.

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