

Torture, Impeachment and a Vietnam Veteran's Tears

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The true horror of what President Bush--and the Republican-led 109th Congress--have done to all of us American citizens by authorizing torture in our names came clear during a talk I was giving on impeachment to a group organized by the New Jersey chapter of Progressive Democrats of America.

I had been reciting the growing list of Bush crimes against the Constitution and the laws of the land and had gotten to the issue of torture. At that point Bruce Tornari, a large guy sitting in the back of the room proudly wearing a baseball hat emblazoned with the words "Third Marine Division" and "Vietnam Veterans Against the War," offered up the comment that he had witnessed torture in Vietnam.

Tornari, who had been a Marine rifleman began to tell us how his four-man unit had captured a North Vietnamese soldier who had been heading towards his unit. They had turned him over to a unit of South Vietnamese troops that was attached to them, and were stationed that night in a foxhole position about 100 yards away from the South Vietnamese (ARVN) troops holding the prisoner. He said that night the ARVN soldiers began torturing the captive. As he spoke, his voice cracked and he began sobbing. It was hard for him to get out the rest of his story, but he managed to say, word by painful word, that he had heard the screaming all through that night, and that he still "cannot get those screams" out of his head, some 35 years later.

At that point he got up and, using two canes, hobbled out of the room to hide his embarrassment at his tears. He needn't have bothered; everyone else in the room had wet cheeks at that point anyway.

It was a powerful lesson, for those of us who have not been there, of the horror of torture.

I can't count how many times I have read comments, or even heard them in person, from jingoistic Americans who have said they aren't bothered at all by the idea of American troops or CIA agents torturing "terrorists" or other captives. They typically will say that the victims of the torture are evil people intent on killing Americans, and so who cares?

In fact, however, aside from the fact that torture is illegal under international law, and that it is illegal in the U.S. as a signatory of the Geneva Conventions, since the torture is being conducted upon captives who have never had their cases examined to determine if they are indeed terrorists or legitimate combatants or just innocents picked up for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, it is inevitable that many of those who are being tortured with the president's approval and in our names are simply innocents. Some of those innocents have died at the hands of their tormentors. Others have been driven insane.

What this still haunted veteran demonstrated, by opening a window into his experiences and the demons of war that still plague him, is a dose of reality--an honest look at what torture really is.

Some advocates of impeachment argue that the case against George Bush should focus on those crimes and abuses of power--like his use of signing statements to render inoperative over

850 acts of Congress or his illegal, warrantless spying on thousands of American citizens--which are likely to win Republican and independent as well as Democratic support. I agree that this is a good strategy, but I think we simply cannot allow crimes like the authorization and encouragement of torture to go unchallenged.

Some Democrats, like Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) have been active supporters of many of Bush's crimes, including the advocacy of torture. Others have cowered, afraid of being branded "soft on terrorism," and have been unwilling to challenge the president. Such timidity and such complicity are no longer possible.

With Democrats in charge of both houses of Congress after January 3, a failure to put an immediate halt to torture, and a failure to impeach the president for his ongoing crime of promoting and approving a policy of torture, would make Democrats as a party fully guilty of the crime along with the president. It would also make us, the voters who put those Democrats into office, accomplices to the crime.

Furthermore, with most Americans now recognizing the war in Iraq to have been a disaster based upon lies and political expediency, and with many recognizing that the so-called "war" on terror itself has been a fraud, no member of Congress need fear such reckless accusations as "supporter of terrorists" or "lack of patriotism," or whatever. The majority of Americans now recognize these charges as the garbage that they are, and as acts of desperation by those whose time has passed.

Torture has no place in American military policy. As the Vietnam vet at my impeachment event Sunday told us, torture hurts not just those

who are tortured, but those who are the torturers, it makes the enemy fight more desperately, and in the end it can be turned on our own captured soldiers in a horrible tit-for-tat.

It must be ended immediately, and those who promoted it must be called to account.

A German prosecutor is currently drawing up an indictment for torture against former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld for his role in promoting torture, because U.S. prosecutors have refused to do so. The ACLU has filed a civil suit in federal court accusing Rumsfeld of torture, on behalf of some of Rumsfeld's victims. Indictments and civil suits for torture should also be filed against Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Vice President Dick Cheney.

But more importantly, now it is Congress's turn, for the ringleader of this monstrous crime--the President--is protected from indictment as long as he remains in office.

It is, after all, Rumsfeld's boss, Commander in Chief George W. Bush, who is ultimately responsible for the torture policy that has blackened America's name.

He must be impeached for this crime, whether or not Republicans will join in doing so.

As Tornari put it to me later, after he had recovered his composure, "Bush has made torture his policy in his war on terrorism. But no one, not even our war criminal president, deserves to be tortured. By sanctioning torture, the United States has lost any moral authority that we might have had at one time. We are now a country of thugs."