



The  
CENTER for  
VICTIMS of  
TORTURE

### **Five Myths about Torture**

#### **1. Opposition to torture has historically been a controversial issue in U.S. politics.**

In April 1988, upon submitting the Convention to the Senate for ratification, President Reagan declared, "Ratification of the Convention by the United States will clearly express United States opposition to torture, an abhorrent practice unfortunately still prevalent in the world today." With that action, he launched a process that was carried forward by President George H.W. Bush, who successfully persuaded the Senate to ratify the Convention, and President Bill Clinton, who signed implementing legislation criminalizing torture into U.S. law and submitted the U.S. ratification instruments to the United Nations. All actions involving Congress were done with strong bi-partisan consensus.

Given that U.S. opposition to torture has long transcended ideological and political lines, it's bewildering that following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush's administration authorized and implemented policies of torture and cruelty of detainees in U.S. custody in Guantanamo, Iraq, Afghanistan and "black sites" around the world.

Formerly a proud international leader in efforts to end torture, the U.S. became a perpetrator, circumventing deeply rooted American principles and causing the issue of torture to become more controversial and politicized than ever. This was not the case in 1988 when President Reagan signed the Convention or in 1990 when the Senate voted unanimously in favor of its ratification. The obligations established in the Convention are as firm and enduring today as they were 25 years ago.

#### **2. Torture is an effective method of gathering intelligence.**

Torture is never justified. Period. Some who seek to find narrow exceptions to that absolute rule often envision scenarios creating a false dilemma between (a) use torture and save lives versus (b) don't use torture and let people die. This false dilemma is irrational and dangerous.

CVT has extended rehabilitative care to nearly 24,000 survivors of torture and severe war-related atrocities from countries around the world. Our clients consistently tell us that they would—and did—say anything to make the torture stop. This is true for victims subjected to physical torture as well as psychological torture. Multiple studies show that torture is far more likely to produce ambiguous and false, rather than clear and reliable, information.

For example, the landmark 2006 study, “Educing Information,” by the National Defense Intelligence College looked at the science behind interrogations and found coercion can make some more defiant and less cooperative while degrading a person’s ability to report accurate information.

This erroneous argument sends a dangerous message to the world. Rather than an effective tool of interrogation, torture is a weapon of repression used by oppressive governments to control populations, stifle dissent and suppress emerging movements. It erodes civil society and destroys trust in government institutions. When the United States suggests that torture is justified or necessary, brutal regimes elsewhere are repeating it.

### **3. Psychological torture is not as harmful as physical torture.**

Torture is a calculated and systematic dismantling of a person’s identity and humanity. It induces long-term suffering that leaves bodies *and* minds broken. CVT’s clinicians treat survivors who were subject to sophisticated forms of psychological torture that have left them suffering from emotional trauma for years—in some cases long after their physical wounds have healed.

Common methods of psychological torture include forced nakedness, sleep or sensory deprivation, sensory overload, and isolation. These methods create a power differential and threatening environment that leave survivors with lingering feelings of shame, grief, or fear that may cause them to suffer from flashbacks or nightmares. Health effects of such practices include Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), severe anxiety, hallucination, chronic sleep disorders, and depression. Survivors may lose motor coordination or suffer from impairments to their memory and logical reasoning. In some cases, the psychological harm manifests itself physically, resulting in hypertension, changes in blood pressure, and other cardiovascular disease.

Andrea Northwood, the Director of Client Services at CVT’s healing center in St. Paul, MN, explained, “Many patients have told me that that fastest way to make someone ‘crazy’ is to deprive him of sleep; it is far more effective than physical assault—without sleep all of the normal perceptual, emotional and cognitive processes that make up our experience of ‘mind’ slip from our grasp within a matter of days.”

### **4. So called “enhanced interrogation techniques” are not torture.**

Whether the term is “torture” or “enhanced interrogation techniques,” the harm, the morality, or the illegality depends on the action, not the term. Malcolm Nance, a former instructor at the U.S. Navy’s Advanced Terrorism, Abduction and Hostage Survival program and a counterterrorism consultant, explained “What makes [waterboarding] torture is actually the fact that it is a painful procedure. It does bring you to a level of debasement, humiliation and, of course, helplessness. And when the procedure is effected, there is almost nothing you won’t do or say to have the procedure stop.”

Proponents of torture cannot continue to hide behind euphemisms. At CVT, we are all too familiar with the physical and psychological wounds caused by “enhanced interrogation

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techniques” such as sexual humiliation, stress positions, sleep deprivation for up to 180 hours, sensory overload, sensory deprivation, waterboarding and mock executions. As described above, these methods have detrimental long term effects. We must call them what they are: torture.

**5. It’s better for the United States to “look forward and not back” as it relates to pursuing accountability for its own acts of torture and abuse.**

It has been well documented—including in a report released this week by the Constitution Project’s bi-partisan Detainee Task Force—that the United States authorized and implemented widespread and systematic policies of torture and abuse during its “war on terror.”

Accountability for past actions of torture and abuse include a range of complementary actions – public disclosure of the truth, independent investigations, criminal prosecutions, and redress. This process is as critical to preventing future acts of torture—in the United States and elsewhere—as it is to ensuring the durability of the fundamental principles of democracy and respect for the rule of law we celebrate as Americans. As Doug Bandow, a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute and former special assistant to President Reagan wrote, “If high-level government officials can violate the law simply by claiming to believe that their actions are legal, then the law is meaningless.”

The Obama Administration has been gravely mistaken, thus far, in adhering to a policy of “looking forward and not back.” Historical experience reminds us that, until there is acknowledgement and accountability for what happened, societies cannot simply move on by looking forward. This failure also opens the door for perpetrators of torture in other parts of the world to shamelessly justify their actions and further shield themselves from the search for truth and accountability.