

The Strategic Cost of Torture, Racism, and Bigotry

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It is natural for Americans to see the current debates over the CIA's use of torture and police killings of young black men in domestic terms. It is equally natural for them to disregard a preacher who threatens to burn the Quran, and see low-level incidents of anti-Islamic and anti-Semitic prejudice as being at the far margins of American society. The grim reality, however, is that all three issues have an immense strategic cost beyond our borders, discredit America's influence and values, and aid terrorists, extremists, and authoritarians throughout the world.

No one who has traveled in the Middle East and Asia can disregard the extent to which every local news media outlet immediately covered the details of the Senate report on the CIA's use of torture, and the end result was to remind everyone—friendly or hostile to the United States—of the torture of Muslim prisoners by U.S. soldiers in Abu Ghraib. Everyone in the region read the same headlines about Ferguson, Missouri, and the other demonstrations of police killings of young black men as they appeared in the United States—usually taken verbatim off of Western wire services. Few Americans may recognize the name of religious extremists like Terry Jones, but virtually every Muslim knows about his threats to burn the Quran.

The Egyptian press used the Senate report to indirectly excuse the Egyptian regime's repressive actions. The Islamic State was quick to accuse the United States and exploit the report in its recruiting literature. Marzieh Afkham, a spokesperson for the Iranian Foreign Ministry said of the Senate report that, "The content of this shocking report shows violence, extremism, and secrecy as institutionalized in the U.S. security system...the illegal processes and inhumane measures...still continue and there has been no guarantee from the U.S. government to prevent the repetition of such disasters."

Neo-authoritarian states such as Russia, China, and North Korea, and enemies such as Assad, the Islamic State, and al Qaeda, all know how to exploit such news and spin the headlines against the United States. The human rights envoy of Russia's Foreign Ministry—Konstantin Dolgov—issued a statement saying of the Senate report that, "its contents are shocking... The published data is the latest proof of crude systemic violations of human rights by U.S. authorities... Such a state of affairs does not mesh with the United States' claims to the title of a 'paragon of democracy,'"

As the British newspaper the *Guardian* has reported, China's state news agency devoted a special page to the Senate report, with the headline: "How long can the US pretend to be a human rights champion?" It also published an editorial stating that the United States "should clean up its own backyard first and respect the rights of other countries to resolve their issues by themselves... America is neither a suitable role model nor a qualified judge on human rights issues in other countries, as it claims to be."

The state news agency of North Korea issued a commentary asking "Why the UNSC is turning its face from the inhuman torture practiced by the CIA over which the UN anti-torture committee expressed particular concern and which is dealt with in the 6,000-page-long report presented by the intelligence committee of the US Senate, and such despicable human rights abuses as white American policemen's brutalities of shooting and strangling black men to death."

People all over the world read the same news reports as Americans that young black men are 21 times more likely to be shot by police than young white men, that a black man is killed every 28 hours by police or security guards, and statistics on how many died in 2013 or so far in 2014. These numbers may be uncertain, but it is all too clear that racism remains a critical problem in the United States. This is not a casual issue in a world where well over 72 percent of the population lives in countries where whites are a tiny minority, and

even the population that appears to be white often has long memories of colonial racism as well as discrimination in the United States.

Muslims are sensitive to both racism and prejudice against Islam, and at least some realize that polls like the Gallup poll show that some 52 percent of Americans say they do not respect Muslim societies versus 48 percent for Canada, 38 percent for the United Kingdom, 34 percent for Germany, 30 percent for France, and 28 percent for Italy. These Gallup results are somewhat dated, but the Pew Forum on Religion and Race, the Arab-American Institute, and other organizations found in 17 surveys conducted since 9/11, that the number choosing “unfavorable” declined from 2001 through 2006, then rose from 21–24 percent “unfavorable” responses in 2006, to levels as high as 63 percent in recent years.

We have every possible domestic reason to come to grips with these issues in shaping our own society, to give real meaning to the principles we say we believe in, and to protect every American from bigotry, the misuse of police power, and steps that go from valid counterterrorism measures to the abuse of civil liberties and misuse of the power of government.

We also, however, need to start thinking about torture, racism, and bigotry in strategic terms. America’s society is far too open to hide such abuses from the world, and the argument that they are relatively minor compared to many other nations simply does not work in a world that we have virtually insisted judge us by higher standard. Some have argued that the Senate report should never have been made public, but in the real world, everything leaks, and speculation and partial disclosure almost inevitably leads to even more severe criticism of the United States.

Even before the decision was taken to release the report, seven UN human rights experts—including Juan E. Mendez, the UN special rapporteur on torture, and Christof Heyns, the special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, and arbitrary executions—called for President Obama “not to yield” to demands from the CIA and to issue the report “in the most complete and comprehensible form possible...your decision on this issue will have far-reaching consequences for victims of human rights violations everywhere and for the credibility of the United States.”

We cannot live a lie—even if some Americans want us to—and we cannot keep and create the strategic partnerships that are the real key to our role as a world power. We need to understand as a nation that it is not enough to have the world’s most effective military forces. Even more than during the Cold War, we are involved in an ideological struggle against religious extremism and intolerance and authoritarian excess that ultimately can only be won by our allies at the ideological, religious, and political levels. We can only avoid drifting toward a multipolar world based on arms races and confrontation if other political systems evolve away from authoritarian ambition and efforts to exploit “foreign enemies” to maintain control over their own populations.

Our military alliances can only work if we are not seen as foreign invaders, exploiters, and occupiers who are the enemies of the values and religion of our allies. We have real enemies and critical strategic uncertainties in a steadily more multipolar world. We cannot use military power against nonstate actors or any major military force without civilian casualties and collateral damage.

If we are to show the world we act with the maximum possible restraint, we cannot use torture, we cannot ignore racist violence, and we must learn to show as much respect for faiths like Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism as we do for Christianity. If we fail in these areas, we not only risk losing whatever we can gain in military terms, but producing far more U.S. casualties—killing our own men and women in the field.

We can never be perfect, and we need to admit this every time we fail or make a mistake. But, we must be seen as doing our best to reject torture and the misuse of prisons and detention, as acting to eliminate racism, and as doing our best to address the issues of religious bigotry—not only in the case of Muslims but every faith. With all due respect to former vice president Dick Cheney and former CIA director Michael Hayden, the problem with acts like torture is not simply that they don't work, it is that they fundamentally undermine America's strategic position in a world where we must do everything we can to show we live by the standards we ask others to set.

No aspect of torture, racism, and bigotry should divide Americans who believe in a strong national security posture from those who support human rights. There is no meaningful way that true conservatives and true liberals should divide on this issue. We must back our military and our counterterrorism efforts with actions that show our values are real, that we are real partners of nations with other faiths and races, and that we are serious in learning from our past mistakes. Like it or not, our position in the world will be as dependent for the foreseeable future on addressing the faults in our own society and actions as on calling for others to change.

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