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Time for Full Disclosure of CIA Interrogations

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It is too early to tell exactly what has transpired between the Senate Intelligence Committee and the CIA regarding the Committee's investigation of the post-9/11 CIA interrogation program for captured al Qaeda terrorists. But this episode is just another in a long series of repercussions from this program that leaves a tornado-like trail of destruction through whichever institutions it travels. After over a decade of controversy, the CIA needs to stop spending so much energy on defending what it did in the past so it can direct its focus and energy on the turbulent world we live in today. The only way to do this is for full, unadulterated disclosure of all documents and information relating to the program so the public can see the evidence and form its own judgments. It is time to come clean, move on, and let history be the judge.

No matter what is in the 6,300-page draft Senate report, we already know that of all the post-9/11 initiatives our government has undertaken, the decision to set up secret prisons for the purpose of torturing captured terrorists was by far the dumbest. The record is clear that the government had absolutely no scientific basis for believing that the violent tactics the CIA proposed to be used would lead to the collection of more or higher caliber intelligence than traditional interrogation methods. We also know with certainty that the CIA had no experience or expertise at its disposal when it launched this program. Any prudent policy review would have made clear to President Bush that such a program would be fraught with a myriad of strategic, political, moral and legal implications. But no such review was conducted. A few decision-makers at the White House and CIA gave the green light after receiving the nod from a coterie of Justice Department attorneys who did not vet their legal analysis with any other agencies or subject matter experts. A disaster was entirely predictable. And that is exactly what occurred.

Our violation of core international humanitarian norms damaged our national security in multiple ways. By debasing the strict prohibition on torture, we diminished the protections these norms will provide in the future, both to our own soldiers and targets of abuse from tyrannical, oppressive regimes around the globe. Tragically, the message that "the gloves were off" migrated to Iraq, where our military personnel degraded prisoners of war. Photos of this abuse live permanently on the Internet and will be used by our enemies to motivate supporters for decades

to come. Our actions created geostrategic problems by embarrassing our allies and making it more difficult for friendly governments to stand by our counter terrorism efforts (with the NSA controversy being only the most recent example). The program has also harmed our intelligence collection capabilities by having sewn distrust between the intelligence community and our political leaders.

There is no undoing this damage. The best that can be done is to stop the bleeding and manage the consequences. President Obama did the right thing by ordering the program to be shut down days after taking office, a step that memorialized actions that had occurred in the later years of the Bush administration. Obama also properly decided (against the wishes of his base supporters) to forego prosecutions against CIA agents involved in the program (although, to be sure, the referral of some cases to a special prosecutor for review caused anguish within the intelligence community).

Despite these measures, the Senate's investigation of the program has led to shocking and unprecedented allegations that 1) the CIA improperly and secretly interfered with a congressional investigation and 2) that Senate staff improperly handled classified CIA information. Clearly, the wounds opened a decade ago will continue to fester until steps are taken to take the controversy out of politics and into the annals of history.

Obama can do this with a stroke of the pen by declassifying the entire historical record. In the event that there are some documents that contain information that is still vital to the national defense -- Obama should publicly list those documents, explain why they must remain classified, and set a date when the next president will review whether continued classification remains necessary.

Declassification seems threatening to the CIA at the moment with a highly critical Senate report on the horizon, but it will also allow the agency to make the case that the interrogation program produced intelligence that prevented future acts of terrorism. If a strong case can be made, that will be empowering; if it cannot, at least the shroud of secrecy will be lifted. With this, the corrosive charges regarding a cover-up, tampering with the record, and other untoward actions can be put aside.

Our nation needs an effective and unburdened CIA, a restoration of trust between the branches of government, and an opportunity to reassert our moral leadership internationally in pursuit of a more just and peaceful world. To do this, secrecy about the mistakes of the past must end.

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