

Fear was no excuse to condone torture

BY CHARLES C. KRULAK and JOSEPH P. HOAR

In the fear that followed the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Americans were told that defeating Al Qaeda would require us to "take off the gloves." As a former commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps and a retired commander-in-chief of U.S. Central Command, we knew that was a recipe for disaster.

But we never imagined that we would feel duty-bound to publicly denounce a vice president of the United States, a man who has served our country for many years. In light of the irresponsible statements recently made by former Vice President Dick Cheney, however, we feel we must repudiate his dangerous ideas -- and his scare tactics.

We have seen how ill-conceived policies that ignored military law on the treatment of enemy prisoners hindered our ability to defeat al Qaeda. We have seen American troops die at the hands of foreign fighters recruited with stories about tortured Muslim detainees at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib. And yet Cheney and others who orchestrated America's disastrous trip to "the dark side" continue to assert -- against all evidence -- that torture "worked" and that our country is better off for having gone there.

In an interview with Fox News Sunday, Cheney applauded the "enhanced interrogation techniques" -- what we used to call "war crimes" because they violated the Geneva Conventions, which the United States instigated and has followed for 60 years. Cheney insisted the abusive techniques were "absolutely essential in saving thousands of American lives and preventing further attacks against the United States." He claimed they were "directly responsible for the fact that for eight years, we had no further mass casualty attacks against the United States. It was good policy . . . It worked very, very well."

Repeating these assertions doesn't make them true. We now see that the best intelligence, which led to the capture of Saddam Hussein and the elimination of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was produced by professional interrogations using noncoercive techniques. When the abuse began, prisoners told interrogators whatever they thought would make it stop.

Torture is as likely to produce lies as the truth. And it did.

What leaders say matters. So when it comes to light, as it did recently, that U.S. interrogators staged mock executions and held a whirling electric drill close to the

body of a naked, hooded detainee, and the former vice president winks and nods, it matters.

The Bush administration had already degraded the rules of war by authorizing techniques that violated the Geneva Conventions and shocked the conscience of the world. Now Cheney has publicly condoned the abuse that went beyond even those weakened standards, leading us down a slippery slope of lawlessness. Rules about the humane treatment of prisoners exist precisely to deter those in the field from taking matters into their own hands. They protect our nation's honor.

To argue that honorable conduct is only required against an honorable enemy degrades the Americans who must carry out the orders. As military professionals, we know that complex situational ethics cannot be applied during the stress of combat. The rules must be firm and absolute; if torture is broached as a possibility, it will become a reality. Moral equivocation about abuse at the top of the chain of command travels through the ranks at warp speed.

On Aug. 24, the United States took an important step toward moral clarity and the rule of law when a special task force recommended that in the future, the Army interrogation manual should be the single standard for all agencies of the U.S. government.

The unanimous decision represents an unusual consensus among the defense, intelligence, law enforcement and homeland security agencies. Members of the task force had access to every scrap of intelligence, yet they drew the opposite conclusion from Cheney's. They concluded that far from making us safer, cruelty betrays American values and harms U.S. national security.

On this solemn day we pause to remember those who lost their lives on 9/11. As our leaders work to prevent terrorists from again striking on our soil, they should remember the fundamental precept of counterinsurgency we've relearned in Afghanistan and Iraq: Undermine the enemy's legitimacy while building our own. These wars will not be won on the battlefield. They will be won in the hearts of young men who decide not to sign up to be fighters and young women who decline to be suicide bombers. If Americans torture and it comes to light -- as it inevitably will -- it embitters and alienates the very people we need most.

Our current commander-in-chief understands this. The task force recommendations take us a step closer to restoring the rule of law and the standards of human dignity that made us who we are as a nation. Repudiating torture and other cruelty helps keep us from being sent on fools' errands by bad intelligence. And in the end, that makes us all safer.

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