

Done in our name: Before we turn the page on torture

From the Editors in the [June 2, 2009](#) issue

After President Obama released memos from Bush administration lawyers that defended waterboarding, Dick Cheney told Fox News that extreme interrogation methods like waterboarding helped the country gain important information and deter terrorist attacks. He called for the release of more classified documents so “the American people have a chance to see what we obtained and what we learned and how good the intelligence was.”

The former vice president is not alone in thinking that harsh interrogation methods are effective and are justified by their results. A recent study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that 49 percent of Americans think torture can often or sometimes be justified. Only 25 percent said it is never justified.

Even more disturbing, the Pew Forum found that religious people are more prone to defending torture than is the average American. Among those who attend religious services at least once a week, 54 percent think torture can often or sometimes be justified. White evangelicals are the most likely to justify torture (62 percent); people without any religious affiliation are the most likely to reject it. Among white mainline Protestants, 46 percent think torture is often or sometimes justified; 31 percent say it never is.

Speculating on why so many religious people countenance torture is a dispiriting task. Are they more quick to accept patriotic appeals to national security? Are they more likely to divide the world into good guys and bad guys—and think the bad guys deserve whatever they get? Are they more likely to be influenced by TV dramas about terrorism?

Whatever the answer to those questions, the willingness of so many Americans to abandon the Geneva Conventions underscores the need for a full-scale investigation of how the U.S. treated terrorist suspects after 9/11. The several ongoing congressional investigations are too limited in scope to get at the whole story, and

they are too enmeshed in partisan politics to lead to the conclusive repudiation of torture that the nation needs to make.

What exactly was done in the name of the American people? How many were tortured? How many died as a result? How many U.S. agents engaged in torture? What information was obtained? If, as Cheney claims, waterboarding elicited important information, then by all means let the nation hear testimony about that. Let us also learn about the cases—probably much more numerous—in which the practice of torture was ineffective and unnecessary, and degrading to all who participated in it.

Convening a truth commission on torture would be embarrassing to the U.S. in the short term, but in the long run it would demonstrate the strength of American democracy and confirm the nation's adherence to the rule of law. President Obama has expressed no enthusiasm for forming such a commission; understandably, he wants to turn the page on torture. But Americans should not turn the page until they know what is written on it.