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I Was Tortured. I Know How Important It Is to Hold the CIA Accountable.

By JUAN E. MÉNDEZ

June 23, 2015

More than once, I begged my torturers to kill me. Years later, I think about it and wonder if I really meant it. I think I did, at the time.

I was tied up, nude and blindfolded, and electrically prodded all over my body. Twice they pretended they were executing me by placing a gun to my head or in my mouth and clicking the trigger.

To my abusers, who interrupted this torture with question after question, this was merely “enhanced interrogation.”

That was decades ago, in Argentina. But today, U.S. political figures — including presidential candidate Rick Perry — are using this same euphemism to describe the CIA’s torture and ill treatment during its secret detention operations from 2002 to 2008. And earlier this month, John Oliver’s HBO show “Last Week Tonight” reported that of 14 declared U.S. presidential candidates, only four said they would keep an executive order put in place by President Barack Obama in his first days in office that seeks to ensure the U.S. does not commit torture.

When U.S. media and political figures repeat the euphemism enhanced interrogation, they reframe the debate in a way that implicitly downplays the pain and inhumanity of torture. Instead, torture becomes a matter of rational decision making and calibrated legality.

Unfortunately, this linguistic ploy is working. Torture is a crime under U.S. and international law, but enhanced interrogation hasn't been prosecuted in the U.S. Thus, while Obama abandoned the flawed legal reasoning the Bush administration used to justify torture, not one person has been charged for authorizing or committing torture in the CIA's secret detention program.

The U.S. government has effectively handed "get out of jail free" cards to those who authorized torture, with significant consequences. Many of those same individuals have written memoirs and gone on talk shows, particularly since the Senate's landmark report on torture was released six months ago, to explicitly disavow any regret or compunction for what they still call enhanced interrogation.

"I'd do it again in a minute," Dick Cheney said in December. Impunity for torture has left these individuals free to campaign for its return.

It has also emboldened torturers worldwide. The United States is obligated under the Convention Against Torture and other treaties to investigate and prosecute those against whom evidence can be found. U.S. failure on these obligations is inviting other nations to follow the U.S. example of impunity. It is providing abusive regimes a ready-made excuse for rejecting international community concerns about their own records of torture.

The euphemism of enhanced interrogation has also redirected the U.S. from pursuing accountability and a process of lessons learned. Instead, the focus is on whether torture was "effective" at providing intelligence or preventing an imminent attack. Even the Senate torture report, which torture defenders malign as partisan, journeys down this rabbit hole. This diversion is all too common in the recent history of torture. The idea of a ticking time bomb justifying torture was also used in Argentina by proponents of the "dirty war" waged by the military against its proponents.

In this scenario — especially as it frequently plays out on American television shows over the past decade — torture is ugly but someone has to do it. Or: Torture is inevitable and produces results whether we like it or not. These arguments characterize torture as exceptional.

The reality is that torture is never confined to just a few carefully calibrated "techniques." The Senate torture report graphically demonstrates this. It reportedly involved sexual abuse including genital touching and forced rectal feeding without documented medical necessity — conduct not even contemplated by the now infamously flawed Justice Department memos justifying torture after 9/11.

Nor is torture ever really limited to a few individuals. The Senate report found that of 119 known detainees in CIA custody, at least 26 did not even meet the CIA's standard for detention, including an "intellectually challenged" man whose detention was used solely as leverage to get a family member to provide information. And the Senate report's "conservative estimate" is that

the CIA applied enhanced interrogation to at least 17 individuals without authorization from CIA headquarters.

Soon after I was tortured, in the late 1970s, I joined a worldwide Amnesty International campaign against torture premised on the notion that, with a consistent, determined effort by democratic governments and international organizations supported by common men and women across borders, torture could be abolished in our time just as the African slave trade had been abolished a century earlier.

We have come far. Today, laws against torture are in place almost everywhere. The Senate last week passed an amendment to its defense authorization bill with the express purpose of strengthening the U.S. ban on torture.

But plainly, laws against torture are not sufficient to eradicate it. As long as those responsible for torture evade accountability, would-be torturers will believe that they can, too. As long as torture goes unpunished, it will continue to be known merely — and shamefully — as enhanced interrogation.