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May 4, 2011

The Torture Apologists

The killing of Osama bin Laden provoked a host of reactions from Americans: celebration, triumph, relief, closure and renewed grief. One reaction, however, was both cynical and disturbing: crowing by the apologists and practitioners of torture that Bin Laden's death vindicated their immoral and illegal behavior after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Jose Rodriguez Jr. was the leader of counterterrorism for the C.I.A. from 2002-2005 when Khalid Shaikh Mohammed and other Al Qaeda leaders were captured. [He told Time magazine](#) that the recent events show that President Obama should not have banned so-called enhanced interrogation techniques. (Mr. Rodriguez, you may remember, ordered the destruction of interrogation videos.)

John Yoo, the former Bush Justice Department lawyer who twisted the Constitution and the Geneva Conventions into an unrecognizable mess to excuse torture, wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* that the killing of Bin Laden proved that waterboarding and other abuses were proper. Donald Rumsfeld, the former defense secretary, said at first that no coerced evidence played a role in tracking down Bin Laden, but by Tuesday he was reciting the talking points about the virtues of prisoner abuse.

There is no final answer to whether any of the prisoners tortured in President George W. Bush's illegal camps gave up information that eventually proved useful in finding Bin Laden. [A detailed account](#) in *The Times* on Wednesday by Scott Shane and Charlie Savage concluded that torture "played a small role at most" in the years and years of painstaking intelligence and detective work that led a Navy Seals team to Bin Laden's hideout in Pakistan.

That squares with the frequent testimony over the past decade from many other interrogators and officials. They have said repeatedly, and said again this week, that the best information came from prisoners who were not tortured. The *Times* article said Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, who was waterboarded 183 times, fed false information to his captors during torture.

Even if it were true that some tidbit was blurted out by a prisoner while being tormented by C.I.A. interrogators, that does not remotely justify Mr. Bush's decision to violate the law and any acceptable moral standard.

This was not the "ticking time bomb" scenario that Bush-era officials often invoked to rationalize abusive interrogations. If, as Representative Peter King, the Long Island Republican, said, information from abused prisoners "directly led" to the redoubt, why didn't the Bush administration follow that trail years ago?

There are many arguments against torture. It is immoral and illegal and counterproductive. The Bush administration's abuses — and ends justify the means arguments — did huge damage to this country's standing and gave its enemies succor and comfort. If that isn't enough, there is also the pragmatic argument that most experienced interrogators think that the same information, or better, can be obtained through legal and humane means.

No matter what Mr. Yoo and friends may claim, the real lesson of the Bin Laden operation is that it demonstrated what can be done with focused intelligence work and persistence.

The battered intelligence community should now be basking in the glory of a successful operation. It should not be dragged back into the muck and murk by political figures whose sole agenda seems to be to rationalize actions that cost this country dearly — in our inability to hold credible trials for very bad men and in the continued damage to our reputation.