Reports of troops torturing detainees, Iraqis endangering U.S. war on terror

And the confusion continues. After the revelations at Haditha, the Bush administration decided to implement “values” training for the military in Iraq. We’re better than indiscriminate violence, so we’re told.

But a week later, the Pentagon said they would omit Geneva Convention wording, which explicitly bans “humiliating and degrading treatment” of detainees from Army training materials. Now we’re prosecuting soldiers for killing Iraqis who they claimed were insurgents.

Wait a minute. I’m confused. Are we committed to, as Dick Cheney put it, fighting the War on Terror on the “dark side”? Or, are we committed to the ideas that made America a shining “city on a hill”? Abu Ghraib, and “torture by proxy,” or human rights and Geneva Convention principles? Which way does America lean? This used to be clear.

Last month’s U.S. Supreme Court ruling striking down President Bush’s plan to use a military commission to try suspected members of al-Qaeda imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay places new emphasis on these questions. The court ruled the commission was neither authorized by federal law nor required by military necessity, and ran afoot of the Geneva Convention. Justices rejected Bush’s broad assertion of executive power and the administration’s pleas not to second-guess the president during wartime.

Last year, we tried to clarify U.S. treatment of suspected terrorists by passing legislation banning torture and the cruel treatment of detainees. Unfortunately, it didn’t matter. The president issued a “signing statement” saying he reserved the right to override the legislation. Nice.

In one fell swoop the president did away with the will of Congress, which effectively allows the administration to continue its wildly inconsistent wink-and-a-nod abuse and torture policies. Consider how U.S. troops have been engaged by those policies:

- Attacks on U.S. soldiers multiplied, while American casualties doubled after Abu Ghraib photos were released.
- In this and future conflicts, captured U.S. troops are now more likely to be subject to torture. The recovery of the tortured bodies of Army Pvt. Kristian Menchaca and Thomas L. Tucker can’t be encouraging.
- After learning of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, U.N. diplomats explained they could no longer support granting blanket exemptions from International Criminal Court prosecution for U.S. troops, who are now exposed to ICC prosecution.
- The administration’s “we need to torture, but we don’t torture” policy has also undermined military coherence. First, it confuses U.S. troops; then it exposes them to military prosecution if they’re caught. Take, for example, the case of Willie Brand, who was profiled on “60 Minutes.”

Prosecuted for helping turn two Iraqi prisoners into a “pulped” mess, Brand is mystified: “[I don’t] understand how they could do this after they had trained you to do this stuff and they condoned it.”

In another case, Maj. Gen. Abed Hamed Mowhouth was roughed up by U.S.-sanctioned interrogators and later stuffed into a sleeping bag by two Army interrogators. There, he was beaten again and later died. The two Army interrogators were charged with murder.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., pointed out that a lack of standards, like those listed in the Army Field Manual, have led to practices that U.S. troops may have innocently believed were supported by policy. And now we want to omit Geneva Convention standards, while at the same time encouraging “values” training? Oh, and you’ll be prosecuted if you don’t follow orders. Got that?

With such clear patterns of torture and abuse “not happening” in the War on Terror, it’s becoming harder for the administration to sustain their “few bad apples” defense. Yet, they continue to do so, even though “similar methods” producing “similar outcomes” have created effective administration officials find hard to swallow.

Take Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s testimony after viewing Abu Ghraib photos: “I mean, I looked at them … and they’re hard to believe.” They showed acts “that can only be described as bluntly sadistic, cruel and inhuman.” One Senate Republican said they revealed scenes of “rape and murder.”

So we’re left with the following situation. Because of policy incoherence and political correctness at the top, U.S. citizens who courageously signed up to serve their country now face open disregard and military punishment.

Can anyone explain why U.S. troops, who were likely following wink-and-a-nod orders from above, should be punished for operating in a confused and contradictory policy environment abroad? The Bush administration’s wink-and-a-nod torture policy has also had a corrosive effect on American principles at home. Indeed, former Adm. John Hutson argued that unless we get our abuse and torture act together, we will have to change “the DNA of what it means to be an American.” This may already be happening.

Polls show many Americans willing to embrace the false promises of a security state, primarily because we’ve been told to be afraid. Thus, even though you stand a greater chance of being hit by lightning than getting wrapped up in a terrorist plot.

True leadership resists fear. True leadership inspires courage. True leadership never tires of reminding us we “have nothing to fear, but fear itself.” Our current leadership sees things differently. Embracing fear, the Bush administration has embraced a wink-and-a-nod torture policy that besmirches our human rights record and degrades our position as a symbol of decency and freedom.

The troops fighting our wars today, our children who will fight our wars tomorrow, and our Founding Fathers, who made these wars worth it, deserve better than this. We all do.

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