

Torture

How to lose friends and alienate people

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**The Bush administration's approach to torture beggars belief**

THERE are many difficult trade-offs for any president when it comes to diplomacy and the fight against terrorism. Should you, for instance, support an ugly foreign regime because it is the enemy of a still uglier one? Should a superpower submit to the United Nations when it is not in its interests to do so? Amid this fog, you would imagine that George Bush would welcome an issue where America's position should be luminously clear—namely an amendment passed by Congress to ban American soldiers and spies from torturing prisoners. Indeed, after the disastrous stories of prisoner abuse in Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay and Afghanistan, you might imagine that a shrewd president would have sponsored such a law himself to set the record straight.

But you would be wrong. This week saw the sad spectacle of an American president lamely trying to explain to the citizens of Panama that, yes, he would veto any such bill but, no, “We do not torture.” Meanwhile, Mr Bush's increasingly error-prone vice-president, Dick Cheney, has been across on Capitol Hill trying to bully senators to exclude America's spies from any torture ban. To add a note of farce to the tragedy, the administration has had to explain that the CIA is not torturing prisoners at its secret prisons in Asia and Eastern Europe—though of course it cannot confirm that such prisons exist.

The nub of the torture debate is an amendment sponsored by John McCain, a Republican senator who was himself tortured by the Vietnamese. The amendment, based on the American army's own field manual and passed in the Senate by 90 votes to nine, states that “no individual in the custody or under the physical control of the United States government, regardless of nationality or physical location, shall be subject to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.” Mr McCain's aim was simple enough: to clear up any doubt that could possibly exist about America's standards.

That doubt does, alas, exist—and has been amplified by the administration's heavy-handed efforts to stifle the McCain amendment. This, after all, is a White House that has steadfastly tried to keep “enemy combatants” beyond the purview of American courts, whose defence secretary has publicly declared that the Geneva Conventions do not apply to the battle against al-Qaeda and whose Justice Department once produced an infamous memorandum explaining how torture was part of the president's war powers. The revelation in the *Washington Post* that the CIA maintains a string of jails, where it can keep people indefinitely and in secret, only heightens the suspicion that Mr Cheney wants the agency to keep using

“enhanced interrogation techniques”. These include “waterboarding”, or making a man think he is drowning.

Although Mr Cheney has not had the guts to make his case in public, the argument that torture is sometimes justified is not a negligible one. Khalid Sheik Mohammed, presumed to be in one of the CIA’s “black prisons”, is thought to have information about al-Qaeda’s future plans. Surely it is vital to extract that information, no matter how? Some people think there should be a system of “torture warrants” for special cases. But where exactly should the line be drawn? And are the gains really so dramatic that it is worth breaking the taboo against civilised democracies condoning torture? For instance, Mr McCain argues that torture is nearly always useless as an interrogation technique, since under it people will say anything to their tormentors.

If the pragmatic gains in terms of information yielded are dubious, the loss to America in terms of public opinion are clear and horrifically large. Abu Ghraib was a gift to the insurgency in Iraq; Guantánamo Bay and its dubious military commissions, now being examined by the Supreme Court, have acted as recruiting sergeants for al-Qaeda around the world. In the cold war, America championed the Helsinki human-rights accords. This time, the world’s most magnificent democracy is struggling against vile terrorists who thought nothing of slaughtering thousands of innocent civilians—and yet the administration has somehow contrived to turn America’s own human-rights record into a subject of legitimate debate.

Mr Bush would rightly point out that anti-Americanism is to blame for some of the opprobrium heaped on his country. But why encourage it so cavalierly and in such an unAmerican way? Nearly two years after Abu Ghraib, the world is still waiting for a clear statement of America’s principles on the treatment of detainees. Mr McCain says he will keep on adding his amendment to different bills until Mr Bush signs one of them. Every enemy of terrorism should hope he does so soon.

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