

Does Torturing Our Enemies Make Us Safer?

Immediate claims by supporters of the Bush administration's torture program that Osama bin Laden was found and killed based on information obtained through torture leaves one almost breathless.

Disregarding the absence of clear facts, and overeager to justify an illegal operation, Bush-era officials and others are already claiming that the use of waterboarding and other "enhanced interrogation techniques" led to finding and killing bin Laden.

But let's be clear: Reality is always more complicated than the news cycle. We still don't know what, exactly, led to finding bin Laden, and shouting is often more bluster than truth.

The use of torture by the U.S. after 9/11 hurt us significantly. Just as photos of abuse at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison were used as a major recruiting tool by al-Qaida, revelations of torture have cost us the good will of people who could have helped us locate bin Laden years earlier.

It took the United States almost 10 years and at least \$1 trillion to locate bin Laden. Imagine if we hadn't made the terrible mistake of turning to torture, and how much sooner we might have found him if we had squandered our support with countries across the Islamic world.

Torture has many consequences, and all of them are self-defeating. First, of course, it dehumanizes the individual—both the tortured and the torturer. It also creates enemies—passionate enemies—who feel compelled to respond to the degradation and pain inflicted upon them.

Torture also stains the soul of the torturing nation. In the case of the United States, our embrace of torture placed us in the same league as the countries we disdain for their failure on human rights.

It also results in unreliable information that can cause terrible damage. Just recall the statement by Lawrence Wilkerson, former chief of staff to then-Secretary of State Colin Powell, that information that Saddam Hussein was working with al-Qaida was obtained through torture and ended up being wrong; it's part of what led us to launch a war against Iraq.