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The CIA's excuses about torture just don't hold water.

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Remember Abu Ghraib? Remember waterboarding, CIA "black sites," and "enhanced interrogation techniques" such as depriving prisoners of sleep for over a week or requiring them to stay in agonizingly uncomfortable "stress positions" by chaining their arms to the ceiling?

I know, you don't really *want* to remember all that. The details are distressing: Only sadists enjoy contemplating the pain and humiliation of other human beings, even when those other human beings are alleged terrorists. And that whole dark episode is one most Americans would rather put behind them.

Unsurprisingly, the Central Intelligence Agency is a particularly strong institutional advocate of putting it all behind us. Several years back, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) began a massive effort to evaluate and report on the CIA's post-9/11 interrogation practices, seeking to make a definitive determination of whether CIA techniques were lawful and effective. SSCI staff undertook a $40 million investigation over a three-year period, reviewing millions of classified documents and interviewing hundreds of people, inside and outside the government.

SSCI chair, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, calls it "by far the most important oversight activity ever conducted by this committee."

The CIA refused to permit SSCI investigators to interview its interrogators, however, and a full year after the SSCI adopted a 6,000-page report on the investigation in a bipartisan vote, the agency continues to resist efforts to make the report public.

Let's take a look at the most common arguments against releasing the SSCI report. None holds water.

"It might be embarrassing."

Well, yes: Those familiar with the report say it concludes unequivocally that the CIA used interrogation techniques that constitute torture and that it misled Congress and the White House about the nature and effectiveness of its interrogation program. (As Caroline Krass, the Obama administration's nominee for CIA general counsel, put it during her confirmation hearing on Dec. 17, "It seems that inaccurate information was supplied.") According to insiders, the report suggests that the CIA's enhanced interrogation techniques garnered no valuable information that had not already been obtained through other more traditional (read: non-illegal) methods -- and that the CIA's interrogation was actually counterproductive.

But the role of the SSCI is to oversee the intelligence committee and ensure its accountability to law, not to protect individuals or institutions from embarrassment. If American taxpayers footed the bill for a program that was illegal, ineffective, and defended through the provision of misinformation to Congress and the White House, we need to know about it. The CIA serves the country, not the other way around.

"It might contain factual mistakes."

CIA officials keep charging -- usually anonymously, via unnamed sources -- that the SSCI report is riddled with factual errors. When the report was first completed, the CIA spent more than six months reviewing it and then submitted a 122-page response; after that, SSCI staff met repeatedly with CIA officials to discuss their concerns. At this point, however, CIA objections to the report appear to be objections to the report's interpretation of the facts, not to the facts themselves; SSCI members and staff have objected vehemently to CIA claims that the report contains errors. Regardless, this is no reason not to make the bulk of the report public. The report should be issued with a statement from any dissenting SSCI members, and if CIA officials can identify specific inaccuracies they can issue a CIA response. Why not let the public judge the facts for itself?

"The report might politicize the issues."

There are two versions of this objection, and neither is persuasive. The first version relates to a concern that the issue will split members of Congress along party lines. But for all the polarization in Congress, torture remains one thing that's not a partisan issue. One of the Senate's strongest anti-torture advocates -- and a strong proponent of making the SSCI report public -- is

Sen. John McCain, the former Republican candidate for president, and numerous other Republicans have also condemned the Bush-era use of torture.

The second version of this objection relates to a concern that revelations about past CIA misconduct might put Langley under a political spotlight, possibly leading to greater legislative scrutiny of CIA activities. But that's a good thing, not a bad thing. As recent National Security Agency revelations make clear, the intelligence community can't be left to more or less invent its own laws and procedures. It's an essential and valuable part of America's national security apparatus -- but just like the rest of the U.S. government, it's made up of human beings, and humans make mistakes. We permit the CIA to operate behind closed doors -- but precisely for that reason, we need an ongoing, serious, informed public debate about the nature of CIA activities.

"The report might jeopardize the careers of CIA officers who acted in good faith."

Doubtful. Insofar as CIA officials acted in good-faith compliance with legal guidance provided by the Justice Department and the CIA general counsel, they can't be prosecuted -- even if they used or approved interrogation techniques that the law now considers to be torture.

As for their careers, the evidence so far suggests, sadly, that complicity in torture is as likely to be a career-enhancer as a career-ender; look at the Justice Department's John Yoo, Jay Bybee, and Steven Bradbury, who wrote the legal memoranda that paved the way for waterboarding and the like. Bybee became a federal judge; Bradbury is a partner at a major international law firm, and Yoo is a law professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. Or consider Jose Rodriguez, former head of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center, who got a lucrative private-sector job and was last seen promoting his book about the CIA on *60 Minutes*. Or John Rizzo, former acting CIA general counsel, who's now at a big D.C. law firm and has his own just-published CIA memoir. These guys are doing just fine.

"We need to keep classified information classified."

Up to a point, sure. But the purpose of the classification system is to prevent the release of information that could harm the United States if made public, not to cover up waste, fraud, illegality, or abuse -- and certainly not to save officials from embarrassment. In any case, it's Congress that sets the rules concerning what should and should not be classified. To the extent that specific facts in the SSCI report would endanger U.S. security interests if made public, the SSCI can redact the report appropriately.

More to the point, there are some strange ironies here. Rodriguez has written an entire book and gone on national television defending the CIA's interrogation program and his role in it, and Rizzo is about to do the same. It would be mighty strange if former CIA officials can broadcast their version of events to the whole wide world, but the Senate committee charged with overseeing the CIA isn't allowed to share its own assessment with the American electorate.

"Releasing the report might endanger U.S. troops and spur anti-American sentiment."

The opposite is true. America's abuses endanger its troops and spur anti-American sentiment -- and the appearance of Washington's hypocrisy about those abuses does the same. If we want to reduce anti-American sentiment and protect our troops, the best way to do that is to show the world that we live up to our principles -- to demonstrate that we hold ourselves to the same standards we expect others to live up to and that when we mess up, we come clean about it.

After the Senate Armed Services Committee conducted a similar investigation of abuses committed by members of the military in the wake of Abu Ghraib, the report was released to the public in 2009, with no ill effects. Similarly, when he took office in 2009, President Barack Obama ordered the declassification and release of the infamous Justice Department "torture memos" authored by Yoo and company -- again with no negative effect on U.S. security.

Numerous former military leaders have gone on record arguing for a full accounting of U.S. abuses. To cite just a few, consider this statement on the SSCI report by 24 retired general and flag officers, or this recent op-ed by retired generals Paul Eaton and Antonio Taguba. As Eaton and Taguba put it, "The military opened itself up to oversight and is stronger as a result. If the U.S. military can handle it, so can the CIA."

Your hear that, CIA? Man up.

"But it was all so long ago, and anyway, we don't do that stuff anymore. We should focus on the future, not the past."

It wasn't that long ago, actually: less than a decade. And we "don't do that stuff anymore" only because Obama prohibited torture in one of his very first executive orders in 2009. But this could be changed by a future president with the stroke of a pen -- and a future Congress could also take a different view of torture than the current cast of characters on Capitol Hill.

If we want to make sure the United States will never again resort to torture, we need to set out the factual record: what was done and with what effects. Recent polls suggest that the number of Americans who believe torture is useful and acceptable has gone up in the last few years, in part as a result of books like Rodriguez's and films such as *Zero Dark Thirty*, which suggest that however unsavory it is, torture is an effective counterterrorism tool.

The SSCI report addresses this issue in detail and apparently concludes -- after an exhaustive examination of the evidence -- that this is just plain wrong. Torture didn't reveal anything we didn't already know, and in fact it caused substantial damage to U.S. counterterrorism efforts. Unless the report is made public, however, this debate will remain characterized by misinformation and unverifiable claims -- increasing the danger that in the future, we'll repeat past mistakes.

By all means, let's put the past behind us. But if we want to focus on the future, we first have to face the truth about the past.