

As you may be aware, over the weekend President Bush vetoed legislation that outlaws interrogation techniques tantamount to torture. Last night House Democrats acted quickly to voice their outrage by calling a vote to override the President's misguided veto. While the veto override ultimately failed by a vote of 225 to 188, or 51 votes short of the two-thirds majority required to override a veto, I joined over 150 of my colleagues in standing up to the President and voicing my opinion loud and clear. Simply put, torture – whether it is called that or something more sanitized – is immoral, harms our reputation abroad and is ultimately counterproductive and ineffective. The anti-torture legislation, part of the Intelligence Authorization Conference Report, passed with my support in December. The legislation required all U.S. government agencies, including the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), to abide by the Army Field Manual on Intelligence Interrogation. This manual outlines permissible interrogation techniques and specifically prohibits practices such as simulated drowning known as waterboarding, the inducement of hypothermia, the use of military dogs, and the enactment of mock executions. Currently, only members of the military and other Department of Defense (DOD) employees are required to follow these regulations.

While the practice of waterboarding as well as other extreme forms of interrogation have been disavowed by Administration officials as well as the CIA, the ongoing failure of our government to promulgate uniform and unambiguous policies regarding the interrogation of detainees has harmed our reputation abroad and provided false legitimacy to the very extremists such harsh tactics are designed to mitigate.

The lack of specificity regarding acceptable interrogation techniques has weakened our moral authority and frustrated our efforts to gather international support around stopping human rights abuses, eliminating terrorist havens, and penalizing rogue regimes. Ending the ambiguity clouding our interrogation policies by requiring all intelligence personnel to abide by the Army Field Manual will help restore our image as a nation whose stature is based not just on military might but on adherence to the rule of law and universal notions of human dignity.

Critics assert that harsh interrogation techniques, while unfortunate, are necessary when confronting terrorists willing to sacrifice their own lives and those of innocent civilians for political and religious ends. But many former interrogators have questioned the reliability of the most brutal interrogation techniques. They insist that such practices merely compel the suspect to tell the interrogator what he or she wants to hear.

Even General Petraeus, our top commander in Iraq, stated last year, 'Some may argue that we would be more effective if we sanctioned torture or other expedient methods to obtain information from the enemy. They would be wrong. Beyond the basic fact that such actions are illegal, history shows that they also are frequently neither useful nor necessary.'

Yet even debating the effectiveness of these measures obfuscates their harmful effect on the reputation of the U.S in the eyes of the world. Whatever the value of intelligence extracted utilizing harsh interrogation techniques, it is overshadowed by the damaging symbolism of the U.S. employing tactics easily denounced as torture. The conflicting interrogation policies among various U.S. government agencies helped create an atmosphere of permissiveness and

uncertainty, which led to serious abuses such as those at Abu Ghraib. Without clear policies prohibiting interrogation techniques that are tantamount to torture, the U.S. is made vulnerable, if only rhetorically, to countries such as Sudan or China, who seek out any excuse to deflect international scrutiny from their own poor human rights records. In this way, the ambiguity of our interrogation policies has detracted from our ability to exercise positive leadership on the world stage. I am profoundly disappointed that the President vetoed this legislation. Now, as the U.S. confronts the threat of Islamic extremism, it has never been more important that we stand behind the principles that this nation was built on. We must demonstrate our abhorrence to torture not through proclamations, but through consistent, unambiguous policies that prohibit interrogation techniques demeaning to our founding principles.

Sincerely,

John W. Olver
Member of Congress