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## Where torture begins—and ends

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Torture does not begin in some remote, dark, subterranean cell, where prisoners are hooded and interrogators are masked. Torture emerges from fear clouding vision and it begins on paper, with suited and uniformed leaders exercising faulty rationales, making secret authorizations and committing abuses of power.

Almost seven years ago, the attacks on Sept. 11 unleashed great trauma for our nation. They were also exploited to put forth a distorted sense of national security—that the way to protect freedom and democracy was by violating freedom and democracy.

In the years since the attacks, our nation has had distracting debates over the definition of torture to skirt around what has been allowed to take place during the Bush administration—human rights violations. From Abu Ghraib to Alberto Gonzales's dismissal of the protections of the Geneva Convention to rendition to third countries and secret "black sites" to descriptions of detainees being terrorized with dogs, beaten and burned, or even killed in custody, to torture disguised as "leave no marks" interrogation, senior government officials have not been held accountable for these violations.

These officials are part of the same administration that has stalled on providing information to the American public. Under a court order, the federal government must soon either produce memos on waterboarding and other torture used by the CIA or explain why they should be kept secret. The order is a response to a lawsuit the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed to seek records on the treatment of detainees. From the memos that have already surfaced, the ACLU has described a "brazen willingness to flout the rule of law" in permitting torture and dodging criminal consequences.

For victims of torture, there is no day in court. Where is the recourse and redress for people like Khaled el-Masri, a German citizen allegedly abducted and tortured by U.S. agents? The Supreme Court refused to hear his case.

In today's guest columns, human rights champions discuss the dangers of not holding this administration accountable for violations. And soon, the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) will release recommendations for restoring the international standing of the United States and sending a strong message that this is a democratic and Constitutionally-driven government, not a monarchy.

That restoration by the next president and Congress, with the pressure of a critical mass, must include the repeal of the Military Commissions Act. By permitting evidence gained through torture, which countless experts have said is unreliable, the Act continues to leave open space for human rights violations.

Last year, President Bush issued an executive order that interprets detainee treatment in the Geneva Convention. That interpretation does not make clear what techniques the CIA can and cannot lawfully engage in. This order must also be repealed.

The next president and Congress must also eliminate a culture that serves the president instead of the Constitution. The CCR is correct to state that the type of people appointed to the Department of Justice, Department of Defense and Department of Homeland Security will be key to showing that our nation will uphold human rights.

Removing the bogus legal covers for torture must be a high priority. And so must accountability. There must be a full investigation into the authorization of torture and human rights violations and like all other lawbreakers, violators must be brought to justice.

The critical mass that must say no to torture and yes to accountability includes you, the reader. Public pressure has to be on the legislators who passively watched the dangerous, insidious operation of an administration that believes it can operate above the rule of law.

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