“The Dark Side,” by Jane Mayer, is a harrowing read. I have dealt with the tragic detritus of torture as carried out by Vietnamese and Koreans, but what they did pales in comparison with what the Bush administration has constructed on virtually a global basis. There were traditions of torture in both Vietnam and Korea, openly depicted in old drawings and wood-block prints. So when an emergency arose in those countries, there were no social inhibitions to be overcome when torture was applied. Such was not the case in America. Key members of the Bush administration were so panicked by the 9/11 attacks and the anthrax scare that followed that they showed no hesitancy in overthrowing standards of compassion toward prisoners that went back to George Washington. Clear standards set out in the US Army Field Manual, and the Geneva Convention were also trashed in the name of limitless executive power and fighting the war on terror. Senior leaders at the Department of Defense became quick allies in this destructive endeavor, and as a former CIA officer I am appalled at what some case officers have participated in. “Rendition” is now a dirty word. Revelations flowing out of Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and countless covert prisons in the Middle East make a mockery of our national standards.

Today the mantra from the Bush administration is that we have not been attacked since 9/11, and that “enhanced interrogation” produced torrents of intelligence that kept us safe. Mayer makes crystal clear in her riveting book that this assertion is highly questionable. In March 2008, Senator Jay Rockefeller, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee stated “I have heard nothing to suggest that information obtained from enhanced interrogation techniques has prevented an imminent terrorist attack.” He goes on to assert that coercive techniques used in interrogation often produced erroneous information, as the victims of torture will say anything to get the pain to stop. Mayer writes in detail about one such case where a key piece of “evidence” used to justify our attack on Iraq had come from a victim of torture who told his interrogators "what they wanted to hear;" that there had been cooperation between Al Qaeda and the Saddam Hussein regime. The victim later recanted, but his original lies were used.

The Campaign to Ban Torture is absolutely correct in making its current effort to ensure that our next president, whoever he is, issues an executive order that makes a clean break from policies that permit cruelty and torture. We owe that to ourselves, to our valorous military personnel, and to our standing in the world. If you have any doubts about that, I urge you to read “The Dark Side.”

Review by Donald Gregg