Recent reports indicate that Bush administration lawyers, in their struggles to deal with terrorism, wrote memos in 2003 pushing aside longstanding prohibitions on the use of torture by Americans. These memos cleared the way for the horrors that have been revealed in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantánamo and make a mockery of administration assertions that a few misguided enlisted personnel perpetrated the vile abuse of prisoners.

I can think of nothing that can more devastatingly undercut America's standing in the world or, more important, our view of ourselves, than these decisions. Sanctioned abuse is deeply corrosive -- just ask the French, who are still seeking to eradicate the stain on their honor that resulted from the deliberate use of torture in Algeria. French soldiers had been tortured in Vietnam, in some cases revealing valuable information to their Vietminh captors. Senior French officers decided that the same tactics might work for them. As Alistair Horne put it in "A Savage War of Peace," use of torture may have won the battle of Algiers for the French, but it cost them Algeria.

In 1951, as a young paramilitary officer trainee in the C.I.A., I heard my instructors say that to win the cold war, "fighting fire with fire" would be required. I remember asking, how, if we did that, we could maintain any distinction between what we stood for, and what our communist opponents represented. I was told to sit down and shut up.

But the agency, I am gratified to say, took a strong stand against the use of torture in Vietnam. Under William Colby's direction, interrogation centers were set up, under American control, and coercive techniques were forbidden. I learned from my experiences in Vietnam from 1970 to 1972 that by treating prisoners humanely we frequently (though not always) gained valuable intelligence from them. This was particularly true of battered prisoners who had held out against prolonged South Vietnamese torture, but responded to being treated with compassion by Americans.

As C.I.A. station chief in Seoul from 1973 to 1975, I faced a personal choice of either keeping silent about egregious use of torture by South Korea's intelligence agency, or taking action against it. In August 1973, South Korean agents kidnapped Kim Dae Jung, the opposition political leader, from his Tokyo hotel room. When word of the kidnapping got out, anti-government riots broke out at Korean universities. The Korean spy agency arrested an American-educated Korean professor, accusing him of provoking riots at his university. The professor denied this assertion -- which was false -- and was tortured either to death or to the point where he jumped out a window to escape further pain.

When I learned what had happened, I reported it immediately to C.I.A. headquarters. I sent a follow-up message asking permission to protest the South Korean actions. My boss in Washington, a man who is now dead, replied: "Stop trying to save the Koreans from themselves. That is not your job. Just report the facts."

For the only time in my C.I.A. career, I disobeyed orders. I went to the chief bodyguard of President Park Chung Hee and told him that I found it difficult to work with the South Korean spy agency because it seemed more interested in stifling domestic dissent than in working against North Korea. I made clear that I was speaking personally, and that I had not been instructed to register a protest against their actions, of which the bodyguard was fully aware.

A week later, the powerful director of Korean intelligence was fired. He was replaced by a former justice minister, whose first action was to prohibit torture by the agency's officers.

Every year or so, I speak to groups of active-duty C.I.A. officers. I always tell my Korean story to them, noting that it is one of the things I am proudest of in my agency career. I also urge my listeners to do likewise if they find themselves in a similar position. A few months ago, I received a letter thanking me for my latest presentation to such a group. It was signed by the director of the agency at the time, George Tenet.

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