

God Mend Thine Ev'ry Flaw

Op-ed by The Rev. Ken Sehested · July 2, 2019

In 2014 Senator John McCain offered an impassioned speech on the Senate floor, saying, “I know the use of torture compromises that which most distinguishes us from our enemies.”¹ A victim of torture himself, McCain understood that the use of torture violates the core principles of American society, the very principles that inspired our founding fathers to refer to our nation as the “shining city upon a hill.” Through America’s application of torture and its unwillingness to acknowledge its wrongs, we have abandoned all claim to the moral status that phrase implies.

As Independence Day nears, a time when Americans champion the inalienable right to liberty and justice, we must confront the irony that we have deprived countless individuals of these exact rights. In light of McCain’s words, then, in what sense are we distinguishable from our “enemies”? In addressing this paradox, we can start by looking at our own state’s involvement in torture.

Some North Carolinians may be shocked to learn that our state’s public infrastructure hosts Aero Contractors, operators of the “torture taxis” indispensable to the CIA’s Rendition, Detention, and Interrogation (RDI) program. Headquartered at the publicly owned Johnston County Airport, Aero was responsible for conducting over 80 percent of identified CIA renditions during the program’s first stage (2001-2004). Aero-operated planes would fly from Johnston County or the Kinston Global TransPark to Dulles International Airport, pick up a snatch team, help kidnap individuals in foreign countries, and take them to harsh overseas prisons for systematic torture.

All told, over 50 countries throughout Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East participated in the CIA’s RDI program. Whether in proxy jails or the CIA’s own black sites, captives were held secretly and indefinitely, denied access to families or lawyers, and subjected to harsh psychological and physical abuse that has left hundreds scarred for life.²

Torture is illegal under both international and U.S. law, though Bush administration lawyers spun elaborate layers of sophistry over the five years following the 9/11 attacks to make the practice appear clinical. It was among the ways public officials “went to the dark side,” as Vice President Dick Cheney put it, employing “tools we had never before used,” according to CIA counsel John Rizzo.³ Every journey to that dark side heightens the risk of being trapped there: we are rendered into the very thing we profess to hate.

The 2014 Senate Select Committee on Intelligence’s massive, 6,700-page report on the CIA’s rendition program outlines this gruesome period in our history. Still classified, except for an executive summary, it spells out how we orchestrated and implemented a clandestine network of interrogation and torture.

¹ Jim Nintzel, “McCain: ‘I Know the Use of Torture Compromises That Which Distinguishes Us From Our Enemies,’” Tucson Weekly <https://www.tucsonweekly.com/TheRange/archives/2014/12/09/mccain-i-know-the-use-of-torture-compromises-that-which-distinguishes-us-from-our-enemies>

² North Carolina Commission of Inquiry on Torture <http://www.nccit.org/background/>

³ Mark Danner, “How Dick Cheney Became the Most Powerful Vice President in History, The Nation <https://www.thenation.com/article/how-dick-cheney-became-most-powerful-vice-president-history/>

Proponents of the program claimed that it made us safer. Some “useful information” was gained, according to former CIA director John Brennan, “but there was also a lot that was bogus.” One former top agency office estimated that 90% of the information was “unreliable.”⁴

In 2005, when some North Carolinians learned of Aero Contractors’ involvement,⁵ they formed NC Stop Torture Now to raise public awareness of our role in facilitating torture.⁶ Vigorous efforts have been made to hold county, state, and federal officials accountable, thus far without success. Rather than taking steps to investigate Aero, some North Carolina officials have publicly supported the company.⁷

Building on grassroots organizing, the NC Commission of Inquiry on Torture (NCCIT) was formed in 2017, led by a distinguished list of scholars, jurists, and human rights advocates. The following year, NCCIT published “[Torture Flights: North Carolina’s Role in the CIA Rendition and Torture Program](#).” It confirms that Aero Contractors was responsible for rendering at least 49 individuals for interrogation, either to foreign custody or CIA black sites.

I urge you to read the [two-page executive summary](#) of that report, which Representative David Price [read into](#) the Congressional Record on June 26, the United Nations’ International Day in Support of Victims of Torture.

Our North Carolina story, as part of the larger story of our nation’s temptation to fight terror with terror, is instructive. It calls for a choice by citizens and public office holders alike. In the coming days, many will be singing “America! America! God shed his grace on thee.” When doing so, remember that the second verse says “America! America! God mend thine ev’ry flaw.”

Such grace cannot be segregated from mending. We live with a perilous tear in our nation’s moral fabric. Repair begins with truth-telling, humbling as it may be. Only then can we develop and implement means of mending that rip.

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⁴ Jane Mayer, “The Black Sites: A rare look inside the CIA’s secret interrogation program,” The New Yorker, 5 August 2007 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/08/13/the-black-sites>

⁵ “C.I.A. Expanding Terror Battle Under Guise of Charter Flights,” Scott Shane, Stephen Grey, & Margot Williams <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/31/us/cia-expanding-terror-battle-under-guise-of-charter-flights.html>

⁶ The North Carolina Council of Churches has played a significant, though mostly behind-the-scenes role, in supporting the work of NC No Torture and the NC Commission of Inquiry on Torture. For more see “NC No Torture Releases Christian Study <https://www.ncchurches.org/2019/05/nc-no-torture-releases-christian-study/>

⁷ Torture Flights: North Carolina’s Role in the CIA Rendition and Torture Program, Executive Summary, p. 7 http://www.nctorturereport.org/pdfs/NC_Torture_Report.pdf