



WILLIAM J. PERRY

Torturing prisoners, whatever short-term benefits it might produce, comes at the cost of two huge long-term liabilities: it undermines our ability to negotiate with other nations from a position of moral strength, and it increases the risk that American prisoners, military and civilian, will be subjected to torture. The United States should return to its traditional rules for treatment of prisoners.

William J. Perry was the nineteenth U.S. secretary of defense.



PAUL R. PILLAR

The immediate, specific results of torture are easier to discern—and thus tend to receive more attention—than the consequences that are remote, inchoate, and immeasurable. Our fear of terrorism, like any other kind of fear, exacerbates this narrowing of cognition. We dwell on hypothetical bits of critical information that we hope will save lives if they can be extracted from hardened terrorists.

But the inchoate and immeasurable may be more important than the immediate and specific. The prisoner who knows the location of a ticking time bomb may be a good hypothetical scenario for classroom discussions of counterterrorist ethics, but I find it hard to think of any real-world cases that this scenario resembles. We are told that “enhanced interrogation techniques” have yielded other forms of useful counterterrorist information. We are not told, however, about the effect the awareness of our use of torture may have on the attitudes of foreign publics and foreign governments. Those attitudes are important, even if our perspective does not extend beyond counterterrorism, for they help to determine how many people will attempt terrorist attacks against the United States and how much help the United States will receive in thwarting those attacks.

Over the last few years, the terrorist threat has become less a problem of a single determined group such as al-Qaeda than a problem of the spread of extremist and anti-American sentiment. Future terrorist attacks will come from individuals, cells, and groups that emerge from that poisonous sentiment. Information extracted from prisoners may have some effect on how many Americans die from terrorism over the next few years, but the broader attitudes of foreigners, especially Muslims, toward the United States—and toward the use of force and violence in pursuing their goals—are apt to have far more impact.

These considerations alone argue against the use of torture. The argument becomes still stronger after one ponders two other questions. One is whether torture is effective in producing accurate and useful information, and to what extent the good information is offset or even outweighed by bad information a prisoner may offer to end the pain. Sometimes information can be checked to determine whether it is good or bad. Sometimes it cannot, or it can cause damage before its veracity can be determined. A case worth considering is that of Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi, the Islamist who, after being captured following the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, made disjointed assertions that Iraq was training his fellow extremists in chemical and biological weapons. The Bush administration seized upon these allegations in making its case to invade Iraq. However, a year after the Iraq War began, al-Libi recanted his assertions and said he had made them while being abused by his interrogators.

The other question—and this is where we need to broaden our perspective further—is what effect torture has on other American interests besides counterterrorism. Important though the fight against terrorism may be, it is far from our only interest. We have many other foreign policy objectives. It is hard to imagine how an image of the United States that includes the practice of torture would further any of those objectives. It is much easier to imagine ways in which it would hurt, particularly by increasing the moral distaste, or at least the political cost, to other governments contemplating cooperation with Washington.

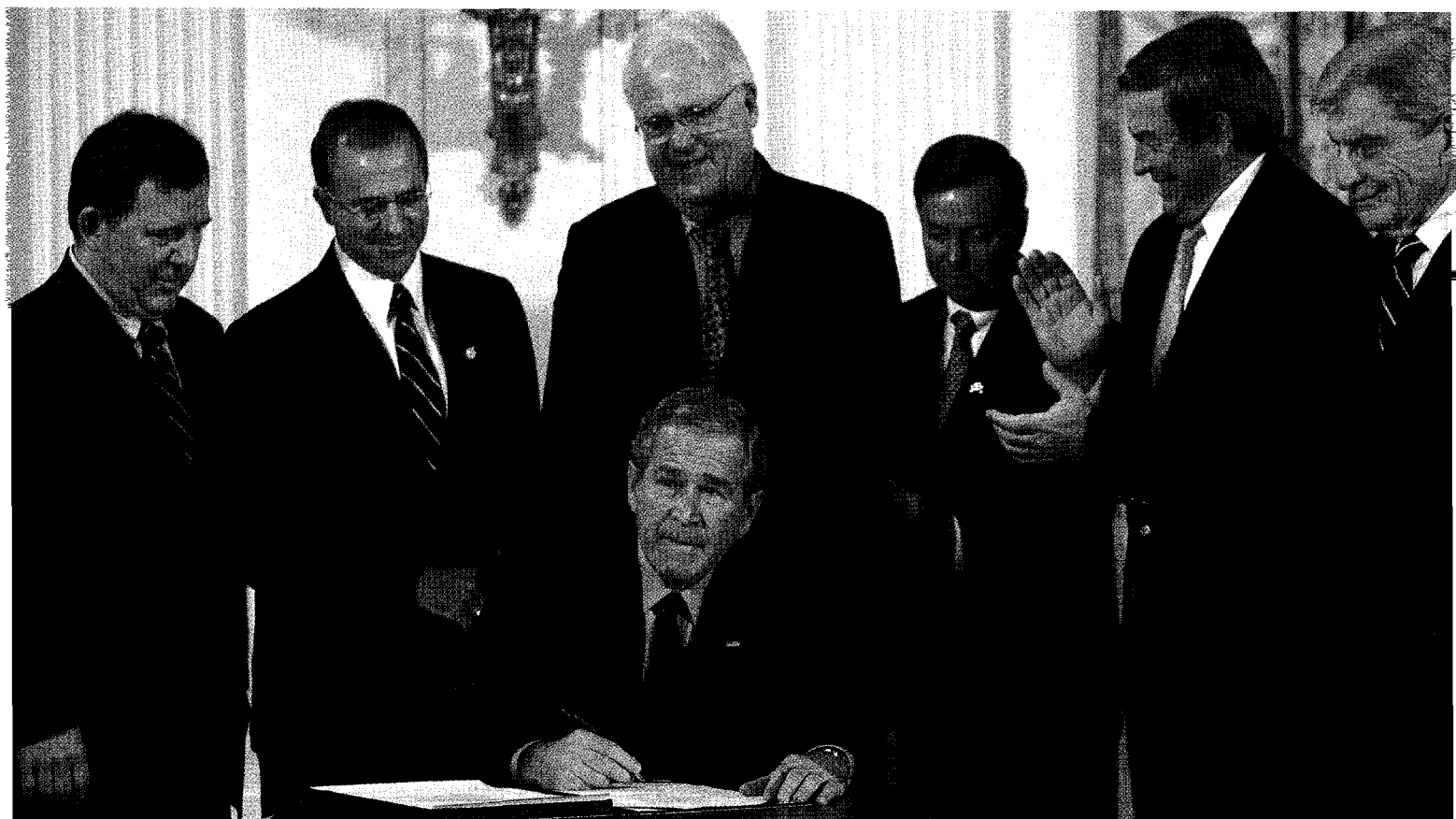
Last, but certainly not least, we must consider our own values as Americans. Terrorism—in the fullest and most literal meaning of the word—entails not just physical attacks but the imposition of a state of fear. In the same way, conquering terrorism involves not just preventing attacks and therefore saving lives, but protecting the quality of the lives that are saved. An important part of what is most admirable and valuable about American life is that we have eschewed practices—like torture—that resemble those used by America’s foes, including the tyrannies that America has opposed in the past and the terrorists that it confronts today.

Paul R. Pillar served for twenty-eight years in the U.S. intelligence community, including as deputy chief of the Counterterrorist Center at the Central Intelligence Agency. He retired in 2005.



TIM ROEMER

As a member of the 9/11 Commission, I listened to hundreds of briefings and dozens of testimonies and read thousands of documents detailing the intricacies of the terrorist attacks that occurred on Sept-



Green light: President Bush signs S. 3930, the Military Commissions Act of 2006, on October 17, 2006. The legislation authorizes the creation of military tribunals and immunizes CIA officers from prosecution for having engaged in activity characterized as torture.