

Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 9
Issue 6 *June Roundtable: An Annotation of "The Red Cross Torture Report: What It Means."* by
Mark Danner

Article 5

6-1-2009

Let Us Not Become the Evil We Deplore

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Recommended Citation

Otis, Rebecca (2009) "Let Us Not Become the Evil We Deplore," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 9: Iss. 6, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol9/iss6/5>



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Abstract

On 14 September 2001, Representative Barbara Lee (CA-D) voted against the House bill that granted President Bush the authority to use force in response to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. As the sole person to vote against the bill (by a margin of 420-1), Lee was roundly vilified as a “traitor,” a “coward, and even a “communist.” Later that day, as the only voice of dissent on the House floor, Lee delivered a speech to justify her position. Famously, she said to the elected representatives of our country, “As we act, let us not become the evil that we deplore.” Lee’s words foreshadowed the next seven years of George W. Bush’s Presidency.

Keywords

Human rights, Torture, War on terror, National security

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Let Us Not Become the Evil We Deplore

by Rebecca Otis

On 14 September 2001, [Representative Barbara Lee](#) (CA-D) voted against the House bill that granted President Bush the authority to use force in response to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. As the sole person to vote against the bill (by a margin of 420-1), Lee was roundly vilified as a “traitor,” a “coward, and even a “communist.” Later that day, as the only voice of dissent on the House floor, Lee delivered a speech to justify her position. Famously, she said to the elected representatives of our country, “As we act, let us not become the evil that we deplore.” Lee’s words foreshadowed the next seven years of George W. Bush’s Presidency. Today, this sentiment regarding evil no longer seem traitorous to American interests in light of the imperial hubris that fed the Bush Administration’s re-continuation of the War on Terror. Now, as we are situated in the veritable “morning after” period of the Bush Presidency, we are still faced with the same threat of terror in a world that increasingly lacks trust in and support of American interests. Where torture and interrogation policies supported by the Bush Administration has become the context for the War on Terror, it becomes necessary that we hold ourselves to task, no less in the same way that we hold our enemies.

Indeed, this month’s centerpiece articles on torture are a testament to Lee’s words. In timely accordance with the ongoing debate on torture, the recent White House release of torture memos has roundly elicited shock, indignation and even surprise by the American public and its lawmakers. Meanwhile, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has transparently denied knowledge of CIA interrogation techniques that were brought forth in accordance to the evolving policies of torture and interrogation designed by former Vice President Dick Cheney. In light of these issues, a few questions arise: First, have we simply not been paying attention to Dick Cheney all of these years? Second, is it possible that we have become so consumed by the threat of evil beyond us that we have failed to discern the imminent evil within us? And finally, have we, as a country, exhausted by the mounting casualties of our own in a war that seems to have no end, finally come to realize the oxymoron of acting with such grave indifference to the respect of human rights in the very name of this ideal?

The articles reviewed this month highlight these questions and more. For example, with high regard for the word “evil,” Cheney wrote in February:

“When we get people who are more concerned about reading the rights to an Al Qaeda terrorist than we are with protecting the United States against people who are absolutely committed to doing anything they can to kill Americans, then I worry... These are evil people. And we’re not going to win this fight by turning the other cheek...”

Cheney has defended the use of “enhanced interrogation techniques,” including water boarding, as a crucial and effective way to extract information from “high-value detainees.” Cheney defends this position by way of indicating that it has been key to avoiding a major-casualty attack in on the United States.

Adding fire to this debate, [Noam Chomsky](#) has recently addressed this fact in his recent article in *The Nation*. Looking to US history, Chomsky’s mention of the evolution of torture policies since

the Ford Administrations is worth noting. Significantly, Chomsky adds that occasionally “what we stand for” as a nation lies in contradiction to “what we do” in pursuit of our values most dear. Chomsky asks us to move beyond the historical amnesia that threatens our moral and intellectual integrity at this time in order to see that the torture policies enacted by the Bush Administration come as a disturbing continuation of a long-standing approach in US foreign affairs.

This month, while President Obama seeks to shut down the Guantanamo facilities while simultaneously refusing the release of photographs taken of tortured victims in Guantanamo and elsewhere, the central claim in doing so is to protect US interests and our soldiers still abroad. Rightly or wrongly, US accountability is what will continue to be central to this debate. Further, Barbara Lee’s words in 2001 still ring through the dark twists and turns taken in the continuing War on Terror. Similar to the articulation of President Obama’s stance on transparency and accountability, this month’s articles shed light on the intricacies of torture and the policies that have brought us to where we are today.

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