

TORTURE CAN NEVER BE JUSTIFIED

On Sunday, while I was putting the finishing touches of [the Reflection on Haiti](#), I was listening on TV to the ceremony commemorating the Battle of Pichincha that took place in Ecuador 187 years ago on May 24, 1822. The music in the background was beautiful.

I stopped to look at the splendid uniforms of that era and at other details of the ceremony.

So many emotional memories related to the heroic battle that decided the independence of Ecuador! The ideals and dreams of the epoch were present at that event. Along with President Rafael Correa of Ecuador were the guests of honor Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales who today are reliving the yearning for independence and justice for which the Latin American patriots fought and died. Sucre was the main protagonist of that immortal deed, driven by the dreams of Bolivar.

That struggle has not concluded. It arises again under very different conditions that were not even dreamed of then.

The version of a speech by Dick Cheney that I had read on Saturday came to my mind; it was about national security and had been delivered at 11:20 a.m. at the American Enterprise Institute and broadcast by CNN in Spanish and English. It was in response to the speech given by United States President Barack Obama at 10:27 a.m. that same day, on the same topic, and to which he was adding an explanation about the closing of the detention facility in Guantánamo. I had heard him when he spoke that day.

Mention of this piece of our national territory forcibly occupied struck me, in addition to my logical interest in the subject. I didn't even know that Cheney would be speaking right after that. That is unusual.

Initially, I thought it could be an open challenge to the new president but when I read the official version I understood that the quick response had been put together beforehand.

The former vicepresident had written his speech carefully, using a respectful tone, at times sugarcoated.

But what characterized Cheney's speech was his defense of torture as a method to obtain information under certain circumstances.

Our northern neighbor is a centre of planetary power; it is the richest and most powerful nation, possessing a number of nuclear warheads that ranges between 5 and 10 thousand that can be exploded on any place in the planet with utmost accuracy. One would have to add the rest of his warfare equipment: chemical, biological and electromagnetic weapons as well as a huge arsenal of equipment for land, naval and air combat. These weapons are in the hands of those who claim they have the right to use torture.

Our country has enough political culture to analyze such arguments. Many in the world also understand the meaning of Cheney's words. I shall make a brief summary using his paragraphs accompanied by short commentaries and opinions.

He began by criticizing Obama's speech: "It is obvious that the president would be sanctioned in a House of Representatives because in the House we have the rule of a few minutes" he said jokingly even though he for one spoke at considerable length; the translated official version runs for 31 pages,

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22 lines per page.

"...being the first vicepresident who had also served as secretary of defense, naturally my duties tended toward national security. ... Today, I'm an even freer man. Your kind invitation brings me here as a private citizen –a career in politics behind me, no elections to win or lose, and no favor to seek.

"And though I'm not here to speak for George W. Bush, I am certain that no one wishes the current administration more success in defending the country than we do.

"Today I want to set forth the strategic thinking behind our policies. I do so as one who was there every day of the Bush Administration –who supported the policies when they were made, and without hesitation would do so again in the same circumstances.

"When President Obama makes wise decisions, as I believe he has done in some respects on Afghanistan, and in reversing his plan to release incendiary photos, he deserves our support. And when he faults or mischaracterizes the national security decisions we made in the Bush years, he deserves an answer.

"Our administration always faced its share of criticism, and from some quarters it was always intense. That was especially so in the later years of our term, when the dangers were as serious as ever, but the sense of general alarm after September 11th, 2001 was a fading memory."

Then he gives an account of the terrorist attacks against the United States during the last 16 years, inside and outside its borders, listing half a dozen of them.

Cheney's problem was to broach the thorny issue of torture which has so often been condemned by the U.S. official policy.

"Nine-eleven made necessary a shift of policy, aimed at a clear strategic threat –what the Congress called 'an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national securityof the United States.'... we were determined to prevent attacks in the first place," he states.

He points out the number of persons who lost their lives on 9/11. He compares it to the attack on Pearl Harbor. He doesn't explain why the complicated action could be relatively easy organized, what previous intelligence reports Bush had or what could have been done to prevent it. Bush at that point had been president for almost eight months. It was well known that he worked little and rested a lot. He was always going off to his Texas ranch.

"Al-Qaeda was seeking nuclear technology, and A. Q. Khan was selling nuclear technology on the black market," he exclaims and adds: "We had the anthrax attack from an unknown source. We had the training camps of Afghanistan, and dictators like Saddam Hussein with known ties to Mideast terrorists.

"As you might recall, I was in my office in that first hour, when radar caught sight of an airliner heading toward the White House at 500 miles an hour. That was Flight 77, the one that ended up hitting the Pentagon. With the plane still inbound, Secret Service agents came into my office and said we had to leave, now. A few moments later I found myself in a fortified White House command post somewhere down below.

Cheney's narrative makes it clear that nobody had foreseen that situation and he pays lip service to U.S. pride in assuming that someone buried in a cave some 15 or 20 thousand kilometers away could force the president of the United States to take up his command post in the White House basement.

"In the years since –Cheney goes on-- I've heard occasional speculation that I'm a different man after 9/11. I wouldn't say that. But I'll freely admit that watching a coordinated, devastating attack on our country from an underground bunker at the White House can affect how you view your responsibilities.

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"But since wars cannot be won on the defensive, we moved decisively against the terrorists in their hideouts and sanctuaries.

"We did all of these things, and with bipartisan support.

"We didn't invent that authority. It is drawn from Article Two of the Constitution.

"And it was given specificity by the Congress after 9/11, in a Joint Resolution authorizing "all necessary and appropriate force" to protect the American people.

"...through the Terrorist Surveillance Program, which let us intercept calls and track contacts between al-Qaeda operatives and persons inside the United States.

"The program was top secret, and for good reason, until the editors of the New York Times got it and put it on the front page. After 9/11, the Times had spent months publishing the pictures and the stories of everyone killed by al-Qaeda on 9/11.

"It impressed the Pulitzer committee, but it damn sure didn't serve the interests of our country, or the safety of our people.

"In the years after 9/11, our government also understood that the safety of the country required collecting information... that could be gained only through tough interrogations.

"I was and remain a strong proponent of our enhanced interrogation program.

"The interrogations were used... after other efforts failed.

"They were legal, essential, justified, successful, and the right thing to do.

"Our successors in office have their own views on all of these matters.

"By presidential decision, last month we saw the selective release of documents relating to enhanced interrogations. This is held up as a bold exercise in open government, honoring the public's right to know.

"...the public was given less than half the truth.

"It's hard to imagine a worse precedent... than to have an incoming administration criminalize the policy decisions of its predecessors.

"One person who by all accounts objected to the release of the interrogation memos was the Director of Central Intelligence, Leon Panetta."

However when Cheney got to this point he had to explain what happened in Abu Ghraib Prison, something that filled the world with horror. "There was sadism there -he said- and it had nothing to do with the interrogations to obtain information."

"At Abu Ghraib, a few sadistic prison guards abused inmates in violation of American law, military regulations, and simple decency.

"We know the difference in this country between justice and vengeance...[we] were not trying to ... simply avenge the dead of 9/11.

"From the beginning of the program, there was only one focused and all-important purpose. We

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sought...information on terrorist plans.

"For the harm they did, to Iraqi prisoners and to America's cause, they deserved and received Army justice.

Apart from the thousands of young Americans killed, maimed and wounded in the Iraq War and the huge funds invested there, hundreds of thousands of lives of children, young and old people, men and women who were not to blame for the attack on the Twin Towers have died in that country after the invasion ordered by Bush. That enormous mass of innocent victims didn't receive even a mention in Cheney's speech.

He skips that and goes on:

"If liberals are unhappy about some decisions, and conservatives are unhappy about other decisions, then it may seem to them that the President is on the path of sensible compromise.

"But in the fight against terrorism, there is no middle ground, and half-measures keep you half exposed.

"When just a single clue goes unpursued that can bring on catastrophe.

"On his second day in office, President Obama announced that he was closing the detention facility at Guantanamo. This step came with little deliberation and no plan.

"The administration has found that it's easy to receive applause in Europe for closing Guantanamo. But it's tricky to come up with an alternative that will serve the interests of justice and America's national security.

"In the category of euphemism, the prizewinning entry would be a recent editorial in a familiar newspaper that referred to terrorists we've captured as, quote, "abducted."

"...and a major editorial page makes them sound like they were kidnap victims...

"The enhanced interrogations...and the terrorist surveillance program have without question made our country safer.

"When they talk about interrogations, he and his administration speak as if they have resolved some great moral dilemma in how to extract critical information from terrorists.

"Instead they have put the decision off, while assigning a presumption of moral superiority...

"Releasing the interrogation memos was flatly contrary to the national security interest of the United States.

"The harm done only begins with top secret information now in the hands of the terrorists...

"Across the world, governments that have helped us capture terrorists will fear that sensitive joint operations will be compromised.

"President Obama has used his declassification power to reveal what happened in the interrogations...

"President Obama's own Director of National Intelligence, Admiral Blair, has put it this way: "High value information came from interrogations in which those methods were used and provided a deeper understanding of the al-Qaeda organization that was attacking this country."

"Admiral Blair put that conclusion in writing, only to see it mysteriously deleted in a later version released by the administration...

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"...the missing 26 words that tell an inconvenient truth. But they couldn't change the words of George Tenet, the CIA Director under Presidents Clinton and Bush, who bluntly said: "I know that this program has saved lives. I know we've disrupted plots. I know this program alone is worth more than the FBI, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the National Security Agency put together have been able to tell us.

"If Americans do get the chance to learn what our country was spared, it'll do more than clarify the urgency and the rightness of enhanced interrogations in the years after 9/11.

"We focused on getting their secrets, instead of sharing ours with them.

"It is a record to be continued until the danger has passed. Along the way there were some hard calls. No decision of national security was ever made lightly, and certainly never made in haste.

"As in all warfare, there have been costs - none higher than the sacrifices of those killed and wounded in our country's service.

"Like so many others who serve America, they are not the kind to insist on a thank-you."

His attacks on the Obama administration were really tough, but I don't want to voice any opinion on that subject. Nevertheless it is my duty to remember that terrorism didn't just come out of the blue: it was the method thought up by the United States to combat the Cuban Revolution.

General Dwight Eisenhower himself, the President of the United States, was the first one to use terrorism against our Homeland and this wasn't just a group of bloody actions against our people but dozens of events right from 1959, escalating later to hundreds of terrorist actions each year, using flammable substances, high power explosives, precision infrared-ray sophisticated weapons, poisons such as cyanide, fungus, hemorrhagic dengue, swine fever, anthrax, viruses and bacteria that attacked crops, plants, animals and human beings.

There were not just actions against our economy and our people but also those directed to eliminate the leaders of the Revolution.

Thousands of people were affected, and the economy, whose objective is to maintain food supplies, healthcare and the most basic peoples' services has been submitted to a relentless blockade that is being applied in extraterritorial terms.

I do not invent these facts. They are on the record in the declassified U.S. government documents. In our country, despite the very serious dangers that have threatened us for decades, we have never tortured anyone to obtain information.

Regardless of the pain caused by the actions against the people of the United States on [September 11, 2001](#) --actions that everyone strongly condemned-- torture is a cowardly and shameful act that can never be justified.

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