Torture and American exceptionalism

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WILLIAMSTOWN >> The Senate Intelligence Committee's executive summary of CIA interrogation files, now universally known as the "Torture Report," has become another issue that a tuned-out public might wrongly dismiss as the usual partisanship. Although a few Republicans — John McCain most heroically — condemned the practices it revealed, the GOP Senate and Congressional leadership energetically denied that the files said what they said, blaming vengeful Democrats and invoking the atmosphere after 9/11 to exculpate the agency.

Maybe that atmosphere does partly explain the Bush administration's fearful overreactions then, and Dick Cheney's belligerent denials now. We might add: so does a bad conscience for letting 9/11 happen, negligently, on their watch.

But why did the report occasion another bashing of our current president, who opposed its publication? And isn't it odd that the torture apologists are the same ones who have criticized Barack Obama for an insufficiently vigorous belief in American exceptionalism?

I think they are confused about what the term means.

For some, "American exceptionalism" means nothing more than fatuous flag-waving. For example, the torture report got this blurted response from Fox News personality Andrea Tantaros: "We are awesome!" This view faults Obama for thinking too hard about whether America is exceptional or not — as in his 2009 response to a reporter in Strasbourg, France, when he prefaced his answer by suggesting that Greeks and Brits might well believe their countries exceptional, too. By ignoring what he then went on to say, his critics have made this preface into a fundamental premise: Obama doesn't really like America.

The problem with this argument is that it proves the point it attacks. While some reflexive devotion to our country is probably a good thing, every country in the world has its unthinking jingoists. If patriotic sentiments are all anyone has to back up the claim that their country is special, nobody can dispute another's claim for the same distinction. If it's all about gut feelings, everybody's country is exceptional.

For others, it means the right combination of beliefs. At least this line has a good academic pedigree. Paul Mirengoff recently cited Seymour Martin Lipset, who defined American exceptionalism "as a unique blend of libertarianism, egalitarianism, individualism, republicanism, populism, and laissez-faire." The president's problem, Mirengoff said, is that "other than egalitarianism," he "seems to have a quarrel with each component of the blend."
But this implies that we have to hold pretty average beliefs in order to be good Americans — which contradicts the belief in individualism. And it has the same logical problem as unthinking chauvinism: since every country has a unique combination of beliefs, every country is exceptional.

Now, people can say that on this score the USA really is different. We're more individualistic than Europeans and more religious than other rich countries. But I suspect that if Obama had offered this kind of sociological analysis in 2009, his critics would have found the answer just as unacceptable. They don't want him to describe American norms. They want to describe him as un-American in his norms.

A third definition of American exceptionalism, most popular since the end of the Cold War, refers to American power. Typified by Madeleine Albright's term "the indispensable country," it says that the USA is the key to getting things done in the world. While it's a good description of contemporary international relations, for our purposes it can't be right: American exceptionalism is an old belief, but US global hegemony is new. The world wasn't counting on American might in 1845.

The bad news for torturers and their defenders is that there is an older, more durable, and more consequential version of American exceptionalism. Near the end of "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630), after reminding his flock that the Gospels command us to love our enemies, Puritan preacher John Winthrop said these famous words: "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world."

Those who cite Winthrop to prove American moral superiority too often ignore his last sentence. But it will not go away. It is already woven into American history. It animated abolitionists and prohibitionists alike. We heard its echoes in George Washington's words to his troops after their stunning victory at Trenton, "Treat them with humanity, and let them have no reason to complain of our copying the brutal example of the British Army in their treatment of our unfortunate brethren who have fallen into their hands."

It says that we can only realize the promise of American exceptionalism by acting in accordance with its sublime responsibility — and that the whole world is watching to see what we do next.

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