

Most Americans have long known that the horrors of Abu Ghraib were not the work of a few low-ranking sociopaths. All but President Bush's most unquestioning supporters recognized the chain of unprincipled decisions that led to the abuse, torture and death in prisons run by the American military and intelligence services.

Now, a bipartisan report by the Senate Armed Services Committee has made what amounts to a strong case for bringing criminal charges against former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld; his legal counsel, William J. Haynes; and potentially other top officials, including the former White House counsel Alberto Gonzales and David Addington, Vice President Dick Cheney's former chief of staff.

The report shows how actions by these men "led directly" to what happened at Abu Ghraib, in Afghanistan, in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and in secret C.I.A. prisons.

It said these top officials, charged with defending the Constitution and America's standing in the world, methodically introduced interrogation practices based on illegal tortures devised by Chinese agents during the Korean War. Until the Bush administration, their only use in the United States was to train soldiers to resist what might be done to them if they were captured by a lawless enemy.

The officials then issued legally and morally bankrupt documents to justify their actions, starting with a presidential order saying that the Geneva Conventions did not apply to prisoners of the "war on terror" — the first time any democratic nation had unilaterally reinterpreted the conventions.

That order set the stage for the infamous redefinition of torture at the Justice Department, and then Mr. Rumsfeld's authorization of "aggressive" interrogation methods. Some of those methods were torture by any rational definition and many of them violate laws and treaties against abusive and degrading treatment.

These top officials ignored warnings from lawyers in every branch of the armed forces that they were breaking the law, subjecting uniformed soldiers to possible criminal charges and authorizing abuses that were not only considered by experts to be ineffective, but were actually counterproductive.

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