

Shame on us: Some means can never be justified

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [April 18, 2006](#) issue

I am unapologetically patriotic by temperament and upbringing. I sing the national anthem at Wrigley Field, get chills when the navy's Blue Angels roar overhead at the Chicago Air Show, and fly the flag on the Fourth of July. I spent some time in the air force ROTC, and some of my classmates flew missions in Vietnam. I supported the U.S. defense of South Vietnam longer than many of my contemporaries—and longer than I should have. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1991, I lamented the resulting war led by the U.S. but concluded that we did what had to be done. I have never yet understood why it was necessary for the U.S. to invade Iraq in 2003, and I am deeply distressed that my government was less than honest in presenting its rationale for the invasion. But it is not a bad thing that there is one less cruel dictator in the world. And I think the U.S. must stay in Iraq to help resolve the violent conflict that our military action has stimulated.

But my country is doing something I cannot support, something that breaks my heart. The torture of military prisoners, the transfer of prisoners (the government says they are detainees and not officially prisoners of war, and so are not subject to the Geneva Conventions) to countries that openly violate basic human rights and practice torture, has made me, for the first time in my life, ashamed of something my country is doing. I cannot believe what I am reading about it.

Kermit Johnson's essay in this issue merits your attention. He served his country with great distinction as head of army chaplains, retiring with the rank of major general. I once invited Johnson to preach and speak at a forum on U.S. policy during the Reagan years. His listeners learned a lot about the complex realities of the world. He earned everybody's careful attention and respect. Now Johnson says, "Out of an unsentimental patriotism we must say no to torture and all inhuman forms of interrogation and incarceration."

Johnson points out that the practice of torture not only contributes to our losing the all-important battle for hearts and minds, but also endangers the lives of American

troops who are captured in combat. And he reminds us of the basic moral premise on which free, open and humane societies are built: that some means can never be justified, even by noble ends.