

Dismantling the good man myth

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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In the past few weeks, we have faced brutal horrors, made even worse because they are the torments carried out by our own hands. The [torture report](#) was released, amidst fears and warnings that there would be international uprisings and retaliations. Republicans have accused Democrats of seizing a political moment, in order to make the Bush administration look bad to the detriment of national security. The talking points seem to echo through the red party, aside from John McCain, who has been a victim of torture himself and has a first-hand knowledge of the evil.

The violent reaction to the report has not been realized. Instead, the pages have been like probing a deep and festering wound in the soul of our nation. To make matters worse, we have heard [politicians defend the tactics](#) that were used—even on people who were willing to talk freely without coercion.

I remember seeing those first pictures of the [abuses in Abu Ghraib](#). The smirking soldiers taking selfie souvenirs with tortured men. I shook with a pain, as if my intestines had been ripped from my gut. *Can't we be the good guys?* I prayed as tears began to stream down my face. *I just want to be the good guys.*

I'm not one to get God and country mixed up in my mind too much. I'm not someone who thinks that the United States is holy, right, and just in its actions. I am not naïve to our atrocities. But this still scares me. It feels like we're a character in a [Christopher Nolan](#) movie. Somehow we black out and wake up with blood all over our hands.

It makes me wonder about human nature. I have read as much [Philip Zimbardo](#) as I can, while consuming the irony that Zimbardo seems to be orchestrating torture as he studies it. I participate in culpability as I use his work. The questions remain. Why do good people do deplorable things? Why does it happen through out history? Would I inevitably do the same things if I were in the same situation? How can we avoid it? (A related aside: if you've got the time, check out this [George Saunders story](#).)

There are so many theological implications to all of this. If there is one thing I struggle with my Reformed tradition the most, it is the depravity of humanity. I don't

think that it's psychologically healthy for us to tell one another or ourselves that we are depraved. I would not say that to a child, in the fear that it might become a prophecy that will be fulfilled. It mars the fact that he or she is beloved and made in the image of God. So why would I utter it to a congregation? Why would I say it to a people?

Yet, the totality of our depravity remains undeniable as we read about the waterboarding, sleep deprivation and rectal feeding. Would it be more damaging to believe that we are all good in the face of such reports? Would it somehow sanctify our despicable actions? Isn't it more important to acknowledge that we have this propensity for depravity and make sure that we are able to repent in the midst of it? And, isn't it important to remember that we're not always the good guys, and every one needs oversight?