

Torture is a Moral Issue
Friday Panel Opening Remarks
By David DeCosse
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Welcome to this evening's panel, "Torture is a Moral Issue," the first event in a conference sponsored by the Council of Churches of Santa Clara County, the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, No2Torture, Bay Area Religious Campaign Against Torture, Network for Spiritual Progressives, California Council of Churches, Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco, First Congregational United Church of Christ in Palo Alto, and MicahsCall.org.

The conference will conclude tomorrow with a daylong series of talks, discussions, strategy sessions, and occasions for worship – all from 9 to 5 at the First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto. Please speak to individuals here tonight about tomorrow's terrific event. Or please pick up information available here in the room about the event.

How do people of faith speak in the American public square about the issue of torture? How is it possible to persuade fellow citizens, many of them people of faith themselves, that torture is not only a moral issue – as this conference and the related campaign against torture have long signaled – but that torture is wrong and that the soul of the United States is at stake in acknowledging that judgment?

Of course, arguments must be marshaled; facts lined up; strategic action plans made; and the resources of respective faith traditions plumbed for the images and stories that might resonate across American public space to persuade our fellow citizens that even self-confessed 9-11 mastermind Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, who told the International Committee of the Red Cross "the worst day was when I was beaten for about half an hour by one of the interrogators. My head was banged against the wall so hard that it started to bleed. Cold water was poured on my head. This was then repeated with other interrogators. Finally I was taken for a session of waterboarding" – that even Khaled Sheikh Mohammed has a soul.

But this effort won't be easy. The politics of fear may have been practiced artfully for the last years in this country. But even its cynical deceptions can't obscure the fact that in the post 9-11 world many Americans are genuinely afraid. Moreover, there's the challenge of saying persuasively exactly how and why a self-confessed mass murderer like Mohammed has a soul and how and why the presence of such a soul in him means that the spirit of such a soul may never be turned against its possessor, as is the aim of torture. Lastly, there is the Jack Bauer problem and the incredible persuasive power of the ticking time bomb scenario: A dirty bomb in a suitcase somewhere in San Francisco and a known Islamist radical in custody and with apparent knowledge of the device. It's not just that many think: Who wouldn't okay torture in such a case? Who wouldn't break a person in the face of the benefit of saving thousands of lives? It's also the overwhelming tendency of this nerve-wracking hypothetical to become the one and only way by which Americans reason morally about torture. If it was right for Jack Bauer, then it's got to be right for every other situation, too.

So how do we meet these challenges and call our brother and sister Americans to confront what is really at stake here. I know that many groups and individuals in this room and outside of it have worked tirelessly for a long while on this issue. But I think that this evening we have a wonderful opportunity to advance this work by hearing from a diverse panel of specialists who bring a remarkable diversity to our topic.