

## Everyday Ethics

Radio Commentary on KUFM  
Montana Public Radio



Mark Hanson, Guest Commentator  
The Center for Ethics  
The University of Montana

### **Obama's Responsibility**

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Among the first acts of Barack Obama's presidency was the signing of executive orders that close Guantanamo Bay prison and prohibit the use of so-called enhanced interrogation techniques, better known as torture. It didn't take long, however, before Marc Thiessen, a senior Bush White House official, claimed that if the United States is attacked as a result of these changes, Obama will bear responsibility. Such a claim, however, is both highly irresponsible and an abandonment of America's highest ideals.

Responsibility for criminal acts lies, first of all, with those who perpetrate them. That is clear enough. We should also note that lines of responsibility for the actions of others are rarely straightforward. Have Bush policies, for example, actually led to an increase the number of terrorists?

The responsibilities of a President go beyond merely protecting the American people. In the Greek tragedy "Antigone," Creon, the king of Thebes, reduces his moral universe to the single value of the security of the state. As result, he ignored the other moral and religious values of his citizens and came to ruin. President Bush took the same approach. And while we must grant him his claim to have prevented another terrorist attack on U.S. soil *since* September 11, the means by which he sought that protection sometimes came at the expense of the moral principles on which this country was built.

The principles that historically have guided our conduct in war, for example, are based upon a centuries' old Christian tradition of the just war. It requires that a nation be willing to sacrifice some of its own lives to avoid the violation of certain principles. In fact, it calls for the taking of risks on behalf of doing what is right.

Furthermore, the responsibility to protect another does not entail a right to any means necessary to meet that responsibility. We are not, for example, entitled to commit acts of violence against people just because we suspect they might commit violence against us. To be sure, some crimes occur because we restrain ourselves, but we are willing to accept some level of crime for the sake of protecting innocent people, and for the sake of justice.

Canadian citizen Maher Arar is an example of what happens when we go too far. He was taken by U.S. authorities while awaiting a flight home in New York. He was promptly shipped off to Syria and tortured on behalf of the U.S. government for nearly one year before his release at Canada's request. He was innocent.

In times of conflict, perhaps our most difficult but important task is to maintain the view that another human being is nothing less than a human being, no matter what his or her identity may be, and no matter what he or she does or may do. This task is most difficult when we feel strongly that some of the people we have captured have perpetrated terrible deeds against

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innocent people. But denying a person's humanity through torture and denying human rights only emboldens a dangerous tendency to objectify others in warfare so that we may destroy them without any sense of tragedy.

Obama's inaugural address called upon us to set aside childish things. Among them is the tendency to point fingers and say, it's your fault, when in fact the causes of a problem go far beyond simple explanations and black and white judgments. Thiessen's claim that Obama would be responsible for another terrorist attack seems nothing less than an opening shot in a strategy to use fear to obtain political gain should another attack occur. We can do better than that.

Obama's inauguration set out a mission to reground American leadership on the best of our ethical and political principles. "Our security," he said, "emanates from the justness of our cause; the force of our example; the tempering qualities of humility and restraint." Obama rejects the false choice between our safety and our ideals.

These ideals are what distinguish us from our enemies. And we should be willing to die for these values, but not to torture for them. If we set them aside, we have abandoned what we claim to fight for, and become what we claim to abhor. We will also have sacrificed not only what Obama has called the better part of our history, but also the better part of our humanity.

This is Mark Hanson, guest commentator for the Center for Ethics at the University of Montana.