

Moral low ground

by *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

Be wary of those who plant their flags on the moral high ground to open the door for doing what is patently immoral.

It is what President Bush did last weekend when he vetoed legislation that would limit the CIA to interrogation techniques contained in the Army field manual. It's about protecting us, the president said in his Saturday radio address. And he cited terrorist acts thwarted because the administration gave its interrogators some flexibility. The problem with the president's claims is that, among others, Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, says they can't discern evidence that they are true. On Tuesday, the House, requiring a two-thirds vote, failed to override the veto, 225-188.

Many of the votes against this bill allegedly were about the pork hidden in the measure. Yes, unvetted earmarks are objectionable. But don't buy the moralizing here, either. We'd bet a good number of consistent trough feeders were among those voting against the override.

This bill and the president's veto are about torture. The president avers that it's about allowing what is legal, but his definition of "legal" has been suspect. And the CIA chief says the handbook does not represent the universe of effective interrogation techniques. Fine, ban torture - in statute. Any takers in this crowd?

The United States' top general in Iraq, David Petraeus, whose troops are certainly faced with the day-to-day necessity to get information fast, has some words of note on the topic.

In a letter last year to the troops, the general said, "Our values and the laws governing warfare teach us to respect human dignity, maintain our integrity and do what is right. Adherence to our values distinguishes us from our enemy. This fight depends on securing the population, which must understand that we - not our enemies - occupy the moral high ground."

He added, "Some may argue that we would be more effective if we sanctioned torture or other expedient methods to obtain information from the enemy. They would be wrong. Beyond the basic fact that such actions are illegal, history shows that they also are frequently neither useful nor necessary."

Well put. Enough said.

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