On Campus

Torture's Thin Line

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Torture is banned by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Eighth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, but what counts as torture is up for debate in the United States. “Torture on Trial,” a panel discussion held at Columbia Law School in cooperation with SIPA’s student-run Human Rights Working Group on April 14, explored the moral and national security implications of the U.S. government’s allowing extreme interrogation practices such as simulated drowning. Jeremy Waldron, a University Professor and Columbia Law School professor, condemned the government’s justification of such practices. He said that laws against torture are meaningful only if they protect against a government’s temptation to bend the rules in times of war.

“Circumstances of emergency change,” he says, “but circumstances of humanity do not.... Torture is a qualitative wrong. Is interrogational torture different from dictatorial torture? Are our coercive tactics different from Saddam’s because ours are a means to a [just] end? ... [Broadly defined] prohibition against torture speaks to the hard choices that the government must make.”

Former Brigadier General Janis Karpinski, the highest-ranking officer disciplined in the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, provided a firsthand account of the military’s interrogation techniques. In November 2003, she authorized soldiers at Abu Ghraib to frighten detainees with dogs, a method approved by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. But before long, Karpinski said, troops were letting the dogs attack the detainees. “If you move away from [orders] one degree,” she said, “a year later you are 180 degrees from where you first were.” She said that interrogation methods should be reformed in the interest of national security: “Every prisoner you release is your enemy.”

Guide to school abbreviations