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LETTERS

The Torture Veto and America's Image

To the Editor:

President Bush on Saturday vetoed a bill that would have explicitly prohibited the C.I.A. from harsh interrogation methods like waterboarding, which makes bound prisoners feel as if they are drowning.

Reputation, like life itself, is a complex affair, difficult to sustain but simple to destroy. Mr. Bush has reduced the moral reputation of the presidency and the country by allowing procedures that violate basic principles upon which our Republic was founded regarding the sanctity of the individual principles that have served as the template for all subsequent elaborations of human rights around the globe.

The political and social movement for recognition of human rights began in earnest in the second half of the 18th century, particularly with the Jean Calas affair in France (1760s): he was broken on the wheel and waterboarded.

Through the emotional reaction to cruel torment and violation of the body, human rights became self-evident. This helped to define the concepts of individual and humanity for Enlightenment thinkers, including Voltaire, Adam Smith and Thomas Jefferson, and for the natural rights in our own Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

America is currently caught in a battle between the competing rhetorics of homeland tribalism and of humanity. Given our singular military and cultural power in today's world, no less than the future of

250 years of human rights development rests on how this internal American battle is resolved.

Americans sense that this is a fateful election for our Republic; they may not realize how important it is for the world as a whole.

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