



Soft Hearts and Hard Minds: The Enduring Challenge of U.S. Foreign Policy

In the case of CIA torture, *hard hearts* mixed with *soft minds* to further a policy that was not only grotesque, but unwise.

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December 23, 2014

The furor over the [CIA Torture Report](#) is only the most recent illustration of an enduring challenge facing U.S. foreign policy: maintaining a "soft heart" toward the problems of the world while bringing a "hard mind" to the debate about the solutions. The recent history of U.S. foreign policy abounds with examples of how difficult it has been to strike the proper balance.

For instance, conventional wisdom suggests America's efforts in Rwanda surrounding their genocide were too hard-hearted. President Clinton referred to it as [one of his greatest regrets](#). Others suggest that hundreds of thousands of lives could have been saved had the U.S. acted earlier, arguing that just [5,000 peacekeepers would have prevented the genocide](#).

Such soft-hearted claims appeal to our humanity, yet they ignore critical considerations. How might 5,000 have kept the peace in Rwanda, when New York City has a police force seven times larger for a similar sized population? When would they have gone in? A few months before the genocide, when Rwanda's violence levels placed it well behind those of India, Iraq, Bosnia, and Somalia? Once the genocide became publically known? [The first reference in U.S. news](#) came two weeks into the genocide and a U.N. resolution followed a month later, after a majority of the killings had already occurred. Most importantly, what would the peacekeepers have done? Neither side wanted them there. The Hutus wanted no prying eyes as they sought a final solution to their tensions with the Tutsis. The Tutsi-dominated insurgency did not want to be slowed down. They were well on their way to winning the civil war, ultimately ousting the Hutu government in just three months.

Even when the U.S. does balance a soft heart with a hard mind, it can be difficult to maintain this balance. President Obama has managed thus far not to send U.S. military forces to intervene directly on the ground in the Syrian civil war. Despite our concern for the tens of thousands who

have died and the millions displaced by the conflict, there is simply no practical way for the U.S. to use military force to improve the situation. Obama has thus wisely held to indirect support only for those affected by the conflict. And yet Obama has had to fight to maintain U.S. policy against soft-hearted people with softer minds.

Policy makers with too much empathy risk falling prey to this "soft mind" problem—allowing their empathy and idealism to override the pragmatism necessary to conduct successful foreign policy. The worst of all worlds, however, is when U.S. policy combines *hard hearts* with *soft minds*, as in the case of the CIA's torture program. The result has been to further a policy that was not only grotesque, but unwise.

A hard *minded* assessment would have ended the program on numerous grounds. First, the Senate report concluded its enhanced interrogation techniques did not protect American lives. Even CIA director John Brennan has acknowledged it is "[unknowable](#)" whether the enhanced techniques did provide useful intelligence in the war on terror or not. Second, ever since the horrors of Abu Ghraib were revealed, our adversaries have [successfully seized upon](#) this gap between our ideals and actions for propaganda and recruitment.

But in deciding to abandon fundamental U.S. values regarding the proper treatment of detainees, the CIA illustrated the very definition of hard heartedness. In defense of the program, of course, its proponents have argued that the program grew out of practical need—the standard defense of supposedly hard-minded choices. But as the Senate's report makes clear, the torture program was the *opposite* of a hard-minded policy. The CIA's [own study of the question](#) had long since revealed that torture did not work and that there were much better ways to get needed information. Thus, not only did the CIA abandon U.S. values, it did so without any real prospect of practical success.

None of this is to say that finding the right balance between softheartedness and hard mindedness is easy, or that those who fail to do so are terrible people or poor policy makers. But the need to generate a greater level of consensus about where the proper balance lies is critical for shaping U.S. foreign policy.

The United States today faces an array of foreign policy issues begging for urgent attention, from Syria, Iraq, the Islamic State, and Iran's nuclear ambitions to Ukraine, Russia, and the rise of China. All of these issues engage the balance between soft hearts, our concern for the well being of others, with hard minds, our desire to ensure that our policies are effective and realistic.

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