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Torture and the Arc of Justice

Several decades ago, "controversial" subjects in news media included many issues that are now well beyond controversy. During the first half of the 1960s, fierce arguments raged in print and on the airwaves about questions like: Does a black person (a "Negro," in the language of the day) have the right to sit at a lunchcounter, or stay at a hotel, the same way that a white person does? Should the federal government insist on upholding such rights all over the country?

Some agonizing disputes, in the media and on the ground, came to a climax with passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Suddenly, after many decades of struggles against Jim Crow, federal law explicitly barred racial discrimination in public accommodations and employment. After President Lyndon Johnson signed the measure, saying "Let us close the springs of racial poison," controversy faded about access to restaurants and hotels.

But the need for civil rights protests continued, and for a time they increasingly focused on the right to vote. Banning poll taxes, literacy tests and other timeworn devices of discrimination that were routine in the South, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 followed. White supremacists howled about states' rights, but the law took hold.

Meanwhile, housing remained an aspect of society replete with flagrant bias. And "fair housing" became a new benchmark for progress in the sights of civil rights activists. The forces of bigotry were sometimes overt but often used coded language. During a gubernatorial campaign in Maryland, a leading candidate pandered to white racism by adopting the slogan "A man's home is his castle." But for the backlash forces, the last-ditch arguments and slogans failed. In April 1968, President Johnson signed a bill that prohibited racial discrimination in rentals and sales of housing units.

Looking back on the 1960s, it's notable that the wisdom of those civil rights laws is now accepted by almost the entire political spectrum. "Controversial" issues became non-controversial when advocates of human-rights positions were able to get appropriate measures enacted into law.

In a sense, for human rights, we can gauge the progress of our society by assessing

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what has been settled and what is in open dispute.

So, today, what are we to make of the fact that torture is controversial?

In late September, there were new reports that U.S. soldiers have engaged in extreme abuse of Iraqi prisoners. Sen. John McCain responded by voicing support for a Senate measure that would require the American military to adhere to the Geneva Convention's prohibitions on torture.

Sadly, rather than just taking a moral position, McCain felt the need to point out that torture means bad public relations for Uncle Sam: "We've got to have it stopped. It is hurting America's image abroad."

Obviously, even when McCain offers pragmatic arguments for why U.S. military forces shouldn't be torturing people, the anti-torture amendment is a tough sell in American politics today. "Told that the White House was opposed to such an amendment and that the president might veto the bill if the amendment were included, McCain said he was unsure whether there were enough votes in the Senate to override it," the Los Angeles Times reported on Sept. 26.

Torture. Controversial. In 2005 – not 1505, 1705 or 1905 – in the 21st century, in a country that claims to be at the world's vanguard of democracy and human rights.

Trying to gain political leverage for his, uh, controversial position against torture, McCain was strategic during a Sept. 25 appearance on ABC's "This Week" program. Speaking of the Bush administration, he said: "I hope that they will understand why we're trying to do this and why it's so important to America's image in the world."

Similar arguments were made more than 40 years ago, when fire hoses and police dogs were pointed and unleashed at young civil rights demonstrators. And it was true: the vicious actions of a white supremacist power structure did make the United States look bad in the world. But that argument was far from the most compelling reasons to support civil rights for all Americans.

Should the U.S. military be engaging in torture? Evidently, such questions are now controversial. That should tell us something about the news media's current political climate in the United States of America.

"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice," Martin Luther King Jr. said. But sometimes, the media framing of a controversy indicates that the arc has been thrown into reverse.

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