By “extreme circumstances” he meant what is often called the “ticking-bomb” scenario: A deadly terror attack is looming, and you can prevent it only by getting the information the terrorist has. Torture might force him to talk, thereby saving thousands of innocent lives. May he be tortured?

Many Americans would say yes without hesitating. Some would argue that torturing a terrorist is not nearly as wrong as refusing to torture another who is about to do so and who is about to kill another 9/11. Others would insist that monsters of Mohammed’s ilk deserve no decency.

As an ignignant reader (one of many) wrote to the Times last week on the cruel abuse of some U.S. detainees. “The terrorists . . . would cut your heart out and stuff it into the throat they would purposely slam open. So why not detainees, if it will produce the information we need?”

Here’s why:

First, because torture, as noted, is unambiguously illegal—illegal under a covenant the United States ratified, illegal under Federal law, and illegal under protocols of civilization dating back to the Magna Carta. Second, because torture is notoriously unreliable. Many people will say anything to avoid pain. Hence, torture will refuse to yield no matter what is done to them. Yes, sometimes torture produces vital information. But it can also produce false leads and desperate fiction. In the ticking-bomb case, bad information is every bit as deadly as no information.

Third, because torture is never limited to just the guilty. The case for razors and electric shock rests on the premise that the prisoner is a knowledgeable terrorist like Mohammed or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. But most of the inmates in military prisons are nothing of the kind. Commanders in Guantanamo acknowledge that hundreds of their prisoners pose no danger and have no useful information. How much of the hideous abuse reported to date involved men who were guilty only of being in the wrong place at the wrong time?

And fourth, because torture is a dangerously slippery slope. Electric shocks and beatings are justifiable if they can prevent, another 9/11. But what if the shocks and beating don’t produce the needed information? Is it OK to break a finger? To cut off a hand? To save 3,000 lives, can a terrorist’s eyes be gouged out? How about gouging out his son’s eyes? Or raping his daughter in his presence? If that’s what it will take to make him talk, to defuse the ticking bomb, isn’t it worth it?

No. Torture is never worth it. Some things we don’t do, not because they never work, not because they aren’t “deserved”; but because our very right to call ourselves decent human beings depends in part on not doing them. Torture is in that category. We can win our war against the barbarians without becoming barbaric in the process.

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CONGRESSIONAL RECORD — Extensions of Remarks
April 5, 2005

Mrs. MUSGRAVE. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honor the life of Jean Allard, a lifelong servant to the agricultural industry and to Larimer County, Colorado.

Jean was born in Alamosa, Colorado. She came to Fort Collins at the age of five where she grew up on a farm and graduated from Fort Collins High School in 1938. She attended Colorado State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, (today it would be known as Colorado State University). She studied home economics and was a textile major. Jean was active in sports such as basketball, field hockey, softball and swimming. She graduated in 1942.

Jean made all of her own clothes during high school and college, which is evidence of her creativity and willingness to work hard. She comes from a family with a strong work ethic. Her grandparents, James and Jane Ross, homesteaded in Fort Collins when they came from Scotland in 1867. Jean’s family grew grain, hay, and raised purebred Hereford cattle. Their original homestead remained on 1600 Horsetooth Road through the 1980s.

Jean met Amos Allard at Fort Collins High School and they married on July 18, 1941. Their time together as a newlywed couple was short-lived as Amos was soon drafted into the Navy during World War II in 1944. After Jean graduated from Colorado A&M, they moved to the Allard family ranch in Jackson County, Colorado where they raised Herefords. In 1962 they sold their ranch and moved back to Larimer County.

The Allards bought a 297–acre farm in Loveland, west of the current Hewlett-Packard facility.

In March, a few days after arch-terrorist Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was captured in Pakistan, Stuart Taylor Jr. acknowledged that he was probably being made to feel guilty and if that’s the worst chance of making him talk, it’s ‘OK by me,’ he wrote in his National Journal column. In principle, interrogators should not cross the line into torture. But, Taylor continued, “my answer might be different in extreme circumstances.”