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I am studying state sponsorship of foreign detainee torture because I want to find out which factors allow for torture practices to persist with relative acceptance in some circumstances and not others in order to help readers understand how governments make ethical decisions regarding human rights.

The United Nations Geneva Conventions of 1949 were ratified by196 nations globally after the end of the second World War. In Article III, with or without reservations, 196 countries agreed to abide by a body of standards protecting the well-being of persons captured by foreign powers during times of war.[[1]](#footnote-1) Included in these standards is the prohibition of torture. Article III states: “No physical or mental torture, nor any other form of coercion, may be inflicted on prisoners of war to secure from them information of any kind whatever.”[[2]](#footnote-2) As a signatory of the document, the United States is expected by the international community to follow this standard along with other similar restrictions regarding foreign prisoners of war and their rights. However, since the ratification of the Geneva Conventions by the United Nations, the United States has repeatedly violated the spirit of the agreement.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The American detention centers at Abu Ghraib, Iraq and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba are two examples of situations in which torture techniques have apparently been performed on foreign detainees. In 2004, images of American soldiers in Iraq leaked to the media in which the soldiers can be seen smiling next to detainees being subject to various forms of torture including stress positions and sensory deprivation.[[4]](#footnote-4) More recently, US officials have come forward describing what they believe to be torture at the prison in Guantanamo Bay.[[5]](#footnote-5) A judge from the military base, Susan J. Crawford, explained to the *Washington Post* that treatment of one prisoner she was questioned about “met the legal definition of torture.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Because of various measures for classification in the name of national security, there is a great deal that is unknown about the reality of detainee treatment in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. There may or may not be legal loopholes for the practices at hand; a range of debates on this issue persist. Regardless of the legality of torture, however, I am fascinated by the public perception and reaction to each of these apparent human rights crises as they rise to public awareness.

Scholars like Marita Sturken and Luca Mavelli have attempted, through various research projects, to identify which factor or factors have made the American public desensitized to its own government exercising inhumane and seemingly illegal practices on human beings under the country’s control. In Sturken’s article published in the *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, she points out “that the very existence of Guantánamo as detention center did not create more widespread public outrage reveals the disavowal of the centrality of brutality, torture, and unlawful conduct” by the United States government.[[7]](#footnote-7) Further, she concludes that various forms of media trivializing torture have lessened the impact of the reality of it.[[8]](#footnote-8) In a similar pursuit for answers, Mavelli’s research explains that Americans’ acceptance of torture is in part impacted by the distancing of their own religious identity from those of the detainees.[[9]](#footnote-9)

While there is certainly potential for further investigation in the same vein as Sturken and Mavelli, I am interested in examining public responses to torture practices more comparatively in order to extrapolate what factors make some cases permissible while others become media scandals. While the leaked photos from Abu Ghraib caused immense criticism of the American Military from American and international media outlets alike, there has not been a comparable response to closely similar circumstances at Guantanamo Bay. This is an essential puzzle demanding deeper research because clearer answers will allow readers to better understand what is defining the moral criteria used to evaluate the ethics of United States practices with foreign detainees. Once these factor or factors are identified, activism for meaningful policy reform aligning with the beliefs of the American public can be more efficiently enacted.

There are a handful of research questions I am considering pursuing with more depth. What criteria do citizens of a state use to justify the actions of their government? How has the perception of torture changed in the eyes of U.S. civilians since the passing of the 1949 Geneva Conventions? What factors have made the reactions by the United States public different to the situations at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay?

1. “Geneva Convention (III) on Prisoners of War,” *International Committee of the Red Cross*, last modified 1949, accessed November 5, 2017, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/7c4d08d9b287a42141256739003e63bb/6fef854a3517b75ac125641e004a9e68. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Seymour Hersh, “Torture at Abu Ghraib,” *The New Yorker*, last modified May 10, 2004, accessed September 30, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/10/torture-at-abu-ghraib. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “In Pictures: Iraqi Prisoner Abuse,” *BBC News*, accessed September 30, 2018, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in\_pictures/3689167.stm. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bob Woodward, “Detainee Tortured, Says US Official,” *Washington Post*, January 14, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Marita Sturken, “Comfort, Irony, and Trivialization: The Mediation of Torture,” ed. Lilie Chouliaraki and Shani Orgad, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 4 (July 2011): 431. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid, 434. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. L. Mavelli, “Governing Uncertainty in a Secular Age: Rationalities of Violence, Theodicy and Torture,” *Security Dialogue* 47, no. 2 (2016): 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)