Morality, memory and Memorial Day
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Memorial Day is a time for remembering those who have given their lives for their country and the values they died for. But memory - and democracy itself - requires transparency and truth.

There is no higher heroism than a life sacrificed in defense of a just cause. But soldiers do not choose the battles in which they die. In a democracy, it is "we, the people," who choose. So Memorial Day should also be a day to remember our obligation to make sure the wars we fight are just and conducted within moral limits.

Unfortunately, war is complicated and ugly. Critical thinking about war is difficult, and it is made more difficult by politicians who try to control our memories of war by preventing access to the truth. The recent controversies over the "torture" memos, and about publishing photographs taken by U.S. Army soldiers of prisoner abuse during the war on terrorism, exemplify how politics impedes memory and critical thinking.

President Obama has argued that it would be dangerous to American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan to release graphic evidence of American excesses in the war on terrorism. The fear is that these photos might further inflame anti-American sentiment abroad. But the American people need to know the truth.

Indeed, full disclosure is central to honoring the sacrifices of those who have served nobly and died heroically. Pericles reminded the Athenians in his "Funeral Oration" that freedom and happiness require the courage to face the risks and horrors of war. Surely, this must include the courage to face up to the truth about what we ask our soldiers do.

If the extraordinary measures used in the war on terrorism were a necessary tool for defending a just cause, then let's honestly admit that soldiers are asked to do some ugly things for the greater good. If these deeds were not necessary or unjust, then we need to know this so that we can make sure such actions do not happen again.
When governments hide the truth from the people, they presume that the government knows what's best. The strategy of "the noble lie" has been a hallmark of despotic government since Plato defended the idea in his "Republic."

The traditions of a free society are grounded on the idea that the people are wise enough to handle the truth. Since the time of John Locke, defenders of democracy have maintained that truth and freedom are two sides of the same coin. Indeed, it was Jesus who said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."

So it is up to us to engage in honest and careful reflection about the morality of war. Lies and partial truths do not provide a fitting memorial for heroes who died in defense of liberty.

On this day of remembrance, let's honor our fallen soldiers by calling for full disclosure of the wars in which they made the ultimate sacrifice.

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