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President Obama,

On Wednesday you reversed your administration's promise to finally release pictures of detainee abuse.

The release of the photos was won by ACLU lawyers who have fought to bring to light the full extent of the brutality and torture that U.S. Army and intelligence services have perpetrated against human beings in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay and at CIA "black sites" around the world. Torture that was sanctioned and effectively legalized under the former administration, and that, if we are to be honest, most Americans knew -- or should have known -- was being carried out in our names.

Only now is the knowledge starting to give rise to the widespread outrage and calls for accountability that such crimes against humanity deserve. Growing numbers of citizens are demanding the independent investigation and prosecution of the members of the Bush administration responsible for the violation of fundamental legal principles like habeas corpus and the flagrant violation of both international and domestic laws against torture. The pundits, hacks and shills who dismiss these calls for investigation and prosecution -- integral to any serious definition of accountability -- disgrace themselves and their country.

The situation in which we now find ourselves is so bizarre, it's hard to fathom. New revelations continue to surface -- we learn that Vice President Cheney's office ordered and specified *how* a man was to be tortured, and mounting evidence suggests the United States tortured to extract false confessions that would justify preemptive war on Iraq. Yet a Democratic president leads a Democratic congress to whitewash institutionalized torture and in effect trash any conceivable notion of the rule of law, all in the name of "looking forward."

And now we hear that the administration will block the release of new evidence in this hideous criminal conspiracy. Now you, the president who came to power with promises of transparency and change, say you don't want to release the photos because they "will further inflame anti-American sentiment" and endanger U.S. troops fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The ACLU [lucidly replies](#) :

"It is true that these photos would be disturbing; the day we are no longer disturbed by such repugnant acts would be a sad one. In America, every fact and document gets known -- whether now or years from now. And when these photos do see the light of day, the outrage will focus not only on the commission of torture by the Bush administration but on the Obama administration's complicity in covering them up. Any outrage related to these photos should be due not to their release but to the very crimes depicted in them."

Maybe, Mr. President, you've succumbed to all the fear-mongering that the Bush administration and Republican Party sold for so long. Most Democrats have been silent enablers so consistently -- maybe we've all bought into it. We know the truth but we still can't admit it; just as for years signs and traces of torture performed in our name were there, we saw without seeing, and knew without knowing. When those first photos from Abu Ghraib were broadcast around the world five years ago, we told ourselves the sadism was the work of just a few maniacs. When we heard the privatization frenzy that spread like a cancer through the Bush years extended even to interrogation -- effectively making torture its own nightmarish "cottage industry" -- we looked away. And now our first official response is to let it all slide... and just move on.

If we do, we are truly lost. This kind of willful collective blindness must not endure, and it must never happen again. It's not enough to be against torture, in this new political moment when speaking out against it is suddenly in vogue. All the information now so readily available contradicts all the official narratives: that we didn't know, a few bad apples, that those responsible have already been investigated and punished. And then there's the outrageous substitute for a narrative, the debate about whether or not torture works. It's a question so insane, it probably makes bin Laden grin like a Cheshire cat.

So, if torture works, we should... perfect it and use it? Complete insanity.

We must finally be able to look at the photos and see and understand that the broken and humiliated bodies of men half-way around the world depicted therein represent not only the systematically applied U.S. policies, but also the horrible and likely inevitable ramifications of military occupations of other countries.

We hope, Mr. President, you will lead, but the Constitution doesn't allow you to obstruct justice... The Department of Justice must act with conviction and follow the law.

We understand the enormous pressures and complexities you confront everyday. But the old defenses for these crimes sound hollow and horrible coming from your lips. You are defending the indefensible.

Releasing all the photos depicting detainee abuse and initiating an independent inquiry and prosecution of those responsible at the highest level is the only way forward.

This is not an issue of partisan politics. It's a police matter... the investigation of a crime scene in which many more of us are complicit than is comfortable to recognize.

Sincerely,

John Cusack