

June 1, 2009

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

We write to express our profound disappointment with your decision on May 13 to block the release of photographs depicting abuse of detainees by U.S. personnel overseas. We urge you to reconsider that misguided decision and to renew your commitment to our nation's most fundamental principles.

On your first full day in office, you eloquently proclaimed your administration's commitment to the principle of open government. You said: "A democracy requires accountability, and accountability requires transparency." That is exactly right. The hallmark of an open society is that we do not conceal information that reflects poorly on us - we expose it to the light of day, so that wrongdoers can be held accountable and future abuses prevented.

These photographs will no doubt be disturbing, as they should be. And we understand your concern about reaction to them overseas. But suppressing information to prevent public anger is inconsistent with democratic principles. The Pentagon should release the photos while reaffirming to the world that the U.S. repudiates such barbaric behavior and is committed to dismantling the culture that allowed it to occur. In the end, full disclosure of the crimes committed by our government will make us all safer.

The last eight years have demonstrated all too painfully that excessive secrecy creates a fertile environment for grave abuses. Those abuses have tarnished our nation's reputation and damaged its security. We will restore our standing as a leader on human rights not by hiding images of our failures, but by demonstrating that those failures will not go unpunished.

As you yourself have stated, "the Government should not keep information confidential merely because public officials might be embarrassed by disclosure, because errors and failures might be revealed, or because of speculative or abstract fears." Suppressing photographs of abuse places your administration on the wrong side of the law, and the wrong side of history. We hope you will reconsider your decision.

Sincerely,

Alliance for Justice
American Civil Liberties Union
Amnesty International
Bill of Rights Defense Committee

Center for Constitutional Rights
Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, NYU School of Law
Center for the Study of Human Rights in the Americas
Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW)
CREDO Mobile
Electronic Frontier Foundation
Feminists for Free Expression
Government Accountability Project
Human Rights Watch
International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ)
Jewish Alliance for Law and Social Action (JALSA)
Leitner Center for International Law and Justice at Fordham Law School
National Security Archive
OMB Watch
OpenTheGovernment.org
PEN American Center
Physicians for Human Rights
Progressive Librarians Guild (PLG)
Reporters Without Borders
The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society
Veterans for Common Sense
Veterans For Peace