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(Unedited Transcript)

Thank you very much. It's a real honor for me to be here, and a privilege to have learned more about the life and work of Father Geno Baroni.

I want to talk today and say a little bit about the torture abuse scandal, which is very much on my heart, and about why I think it matters. And just so I don't forget -- this is just a little bit off-topic, but I'll just sort of slip it in now -- the kind of domestic priorities, and the progressive agenda that has been lifted up for us today and we all support is one that I think it will not be possible for this country without a new foreign and military policy. And what I have to say about the torture abuse scandal is one small part of that.

Perhaps I should say something about how I got here before I turn to my prepared remarks. The Abu Grabe revelations were a real turning point for me, as September eleventh had been before that. After September eleventh I put some of my academic work aside because I felt right away that our country was headed toward war. And the people who have been mentors for me, in the way that Father Baroni has been for many people in this room, were William (unintelligible) Kaufmann Jr., for whom I worked for about a year and a half one time at the Riverside Church, as his assistant. And Robert McAfee Brown, who was one of my professors. And Robert McAfee Brown coined a phrase that was later taken up by Martin Luther King. They were working together in clergy and laity, concerned about Vietnam. And Brown was very gifted rhetorically, wrote a sentence that King incorporated into his Riverside Church speech, in which he came out against the Vietnam war on April the fourth, 1967, a year to the day before he was killed.

And that phrase is this: "A time comes when silence is betrayal."

And that is I think what has motivated me, more than anything else. I'm just one person. I have a full-time job. I'm an academic, not a political activist. But after September eleventh, I thought at least something needs to be done. I just didn't want the run-up to a war which looked as if, and now has proven to be a war that would not be necessary, would not be a moral war, would not be justified. I didn't want there to be silence from the religious community.

And if I could do something, I would help organize colleagues, as I did, to try to speak out, and there would at least be a record.

I have a granddaughter, I'm on my way to see her after this meeting. She's 22 months old, and I would like my grandchildren to know that there were some people who spoke out.

So I wrote statements, got my colleagues to sign them. And then Abu Grabe happened and I wanted another statement. And when I found out what the princely sum was that the "New York Times" charges to run an advertisement I didn't know how I was going to come up with money like that. A local minister said, "Well, maybe you could start a web site and raise money the way Howard Dean had."

I had actually contributed to Howard Dean, I was kind of excited by that movement, and said, "Well, maybe I could do that."

Well, to make a long story short, I started a little group called Church Folks for a Better America. I get tax exempt status through my local peace organization, the Coalition for Peace Action, I'm on the board there, it's been around for 25 years. It's actually one of the most successful peace action groups in the country.

They gave me tax exempt status, they gave me a webmaster, a way to collect money. And I wrote something called "the Dove ad." I got academics and religious leaders to sign it. We eventually put it on the op-ed page of the Sunday "New York Times" two Sundays before the election, and had money to publicize it in other places. It reached over 6 million readers prior to the November elections in 2004.

And then from there I, sort of by happenstance through the contacts that I made, I ended up being the principal author of an open letter to Alberto Gonzales. The Dove ad had been focused on calling for an early withdrawal from Iraq and accountability in the Abu Grabe crisis. And I then wrote this letter, and there was very little time to organize. You may recall that the hearings took place early in January, the first week in January. We put this campaign together shortly before Christmas in the first weeks of January, you know, not the most auspicious time to be trying to organize something like that.

Yet overnight, we got 228 religious leaders to sign this thing, and Human Rights First organized military lawyers and others from the legal community, who get to testify before the Senate judiciary committee, and we sort of piggybacked on them, and this open letter was widely reported in connection with the military testimony, so there was the military people and the religious people. And then I ended up listening on C-SPAN, actually, to the debate on the Senate floor, and that the senator from Rhode Island quotes from our open letter.

And well, I got evangelicals to sign this thing, I got Latinos, we had Muslims and Sikhs. It wasn't just Catholics, Protestants, and Jews. And now I have an idea, I think there's a lot of energy around this issue of how we could have a national campaign through the churches, to speak out and do something about torture. I think this could cut across the usual religious and political lines. I would like to have a kickoff conference in Princeton on Martin Luther King weekend on theology, law, international law, and torture, that would bring together international lawyers, social scientists, theologians, ethicists, and grassroots activists. And we'd have an educational campaign.

I have some funding. I don't have enough yet. I'm running out of time, I don't know if I'll be able to do that. But that's a little bit of the background of where I'm coming from, as I look now with you about why the torture abuse scandal matters.

Of all the scandals that currently beset us, there is one that history is likely to judge most harshly; namely, the official authorization of torture abuse by the Bush administration. As the Abu Grabe photos have shown with unforgettable horror, serious violations of international law have followed in its train.

Let us be clear that torture is not just one issue among others. It is a profound assault on the dignity of the human person as created by God. It is therefore inherently evil. It violates a person's body, and terrorizes his mind, in order to destroy his will.

The strongest of presumptions stands against it; not only legally and morally, but also as Father Baroni would have understood, spiritually. At the same time, authorizing torture

poses a direct threat to constitutional government. As Columbia law professor Jeremy Waldron has urged, the issue of torture is archetypal. It goes to the very heart of our civilization. Whether torture is prohibited or permitted is a question that separates tyranny and barbarism from the rule of law.

Recently, the PBS program "Frontline" televised a report about how secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld and General Geoffrey Miller "Gitmo-ized" the interrogations of detainees in Iraq. The program included many interviews, including the story of US Army interrogator, specialist Tony Lagouranis.

The former military interrogator stated, "Well, hypothermia was a widespread technique. I haven't heard a lot of people talking about that, and I never saw anything in writing prohibiting it or making it illegal. But almost everyone was using it when they had a chance, when the weather permitted. Or some people, the Navy SEALs for instance, were using just ice water to lower the body temperature of the prisoner. They would take his rectal temperature, to make sure he didn't die. They would keep him hovering on hypothermia. That was a pretty common technique.

"A lot of other, you know, not as common techniques, and certainly not sanctioned, was just beating people, or burning them. Not within the prisons usually, but when the units would go out into people's homes and do these raids. They would just stay in the house and torture them. Because after the scandal, they couldn't trust that, you know, the interrogators were going to do as good a job, in their words, as they wanted to."

Such shocking practices are now so widespread, ranging from Guantánamo to numerous prisons and bases throughout Iraq, to Afghanistan, that the lie has been given to the "few bad apples" theory promulgated by the Bush administration. In a speech last week, Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, former Chief of Staff to Colin Powell, said that top officials, up to and including the president, had in effect given a green light to soldiers, to abuse detainees. "You don't have this kind of pervasive attitude out there," Colonel Wilkerson insisted, "unless you've condoned it."

As the testimony by Specialist Lagouranis suggests, this attitude has continued well after the Abu Grabe revelations, right down to the present day. And let it not be forgotten that the Department of Defense finally admitted to the Red Cross that 70 to 90 percent of the Abu Grabe prisoners were entirely innocent.

"In our contemporary world," states Michael Posner, executive director of Human Rights First -- with whom I'm trying to organize that conference -- "In our contemporary world," he says "torture is like the slave trade or piracy was to people in the 1790s." He continues, "Torture is a crime against humankind, against humanity. It's something that has to be absolutely prohibited."

Posner's organization, Human Rights First, is suing Secretary Rumsfeld over the prisoner abuse issue. But we are left with a troubling question: why can't our government make it clear, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that torture and any other inhumane treatment of prisoners, is wrong, without exceptions? And that it will not be tolerated under any circumstances?

Yet our government has gone to great lengths to narrow the legal definition of torture in order to widen the permissibility of degrading treatment. The administration's torture

memos, as developed mainly between 2002 and 2003, are now infamous. As Anthony Lewis wrote, "The memos read like the advice of a mob lawyer to a Mafia don on how to skirt the law and stay out of prison."

While some of the worst memos have now been repudiated, the climate of permissibility and uncertainty that they fostered still remains. The administration is against torture, and yet it refuses to renounce, without equivocation, the cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment of detainees. In the authoritative language of international law, codified in the Geneva Conventions, the UN universal declaration on human rights, the convention against torture and other documents legally binding on our government, a ban against cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment is not separated from the ban against torture. The two proscriptions are one.

The disturbing innovation of the administration has been to produce new documents that disrupt this unity. Other forms of abuse are disconnected from torture, in order to make them permissible. The policy that results is radically inconsistent. Officially, our government opposes torture and advocates a universal standard for human rights. Yet at the same time, it has allowed ingenious new interrogation methods to be developed that violate these standards.

They include stress positions, sleep deprivation, waterboarding -- that's like putting somebody strapped to a seesaw and dunking them under the water until they almost drown, bringing them back up, and then putting them down again -- waterboarding, mock burials, induced hypothermia, sexual humiliation, and desecration of religious objects.

These practices, which should never be permitted, are no less traumatic than the infliction of excruciating pain. They degrade everyone involved: planners, perpetrators, and victims.

The McCain amendment recently attached to the Defense Appropriations Bill attempts to bring this inconsistency to an end. Despite passing in the Senate by the overwhelming majority of 90 to nine, it was vigorously opposed by the administration. Moreover, it may not survive in conference with the House.

If it does survive, the president has threatened to veto the entire defense appropriations bill. Why should the president be so adamant on this point? What in God's name is happening to our country?

Detaining subjects indefinitely without charging them is not easily reconciled with democracy. Worry about such methods is migrating across political and religious lines. What the government is authorized to do to the few, it can eventually do to the many.

"A government that takes off its gloves," cautioned British statesman Edmund Burke, "will not soon put them on again. Criminal means once tolerated," he wrote, "are soon preferred." The public is increasingly uneasy about what we should have to sacrifice for our safety. In his letter to Senator McCain, a young US Army Captain, Ian Fishbach, gave eloquent voice to these concerns. He described how, despite his dogged inquiries, extending over a period of nearly 18 months, he could get no clear answers from his superiors about the impermissibility of abuse. Having served in combat in Afghanistan and Iraq, and having stressed that he has personally witnessed the torture of detainees,

Captain Fishbach posed what he called "the most important question that our generation will answer": Do we sacrifice our ideals in order to preserve the security?

"Terrorism," he says, "inspires fear and suppresses ideals like freedom and individual rights. Overcoming the fear posed by terrorist threats is a tremendous test of our courage. Will we confront danger and adversity in order to preserve our ideals? Or will our courage and commitment to individual rights wither at the prospect of sacrifice? "My response," he includes, "is simple. If we abandon our ideals in the face of adversity and aggression, then those ideals were never really in our possession. I would rather die fighting than give up even the smallest part of the idea that is America."

Four steps must now be taken, I believe, to clarify that our government has truly abolished torture. First, Congress must remove the false partition placed between the military and intelligence services. In 2004, the Senate was right to pass nearly unanimously new restrictions for the Pentagon, the CIA, and other intelligence services. But congressional leaders in both houses later buckled under White House pressure, and scrapped the language governing the intelligence services.

Whichever agency of our government may be resorting to torture and abuse, the military or the intelligence services, is of absolutely no significance. Trying to differentiate between them does nothing to insulate us from the absolute evil that is torture. Yet it is this very loophole that may now be codified into law to so-called "augmented" -- in other words, a gutted version of the McCain amendment.

Second, Congress must outlaw extraordinary rendition; a euphemism for torture by proxy. It means that detainees are secretly transferred to countries where torture is practiced as a means of interrogation. Although made public only through shocking cases, such as those of Mahair Arar (phonetic), who was deported to Syria by the United States, and Mamdu Habib, an Australian citizen who was sent to Egypt before being held at Guantánamo. It has become a mainstay counterterrorism tool.

Does it need to be said that disappearing people, without any kind of due process, is contrary to everything America stands for, not to mention our laws and treaties? The reasons for a detainee's arrest, and his guilt or innocence, are irrelevant. No sound moral or legal argument can be made that enabling torture through rendition is permissible.

Third, Mr. Bush should make a clear statement, that the cruel inhuman and degrading treatment of detainees is tantamount to torture. He should declare it to be unacceptable in any form, and under any circumstances. He needs to state beyond a shadow of a doubt that America will not be complicit in abusive interrogations. Leadership from the Oval Office would go a long way toward resolving the torture crisis.

Finally, as called for virtually every major human rights organization in the world, America needs a special prosecutor. Our reputation has been so badly damaged by Guantánamo, Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan, and Abu Grabe, that no other remedy will do. The existing investigations are not enough, because they have not been truly independent. Organizations such as the American Bar Association, Amnesty International, and the highly respected International Commission of Jurists, in Geneva, among others have all insisted that an independent investigation is imperative.

Nothing less is at stake in the torture crisis than the soul of our nation. What does it profit us if we proclaim high moral values, but fail to reject torture and abuse? What does it signify if torture is condemned in word, but allowed in deed? A nation that rewards and protects those who promoted torture is approaching spiritual death.

I conclude with these words from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.:

"A time comes when silence is betrayal. People do not easily assume the task of opposing their government's policy, especially in time of war. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak. For we are deeply in need of a new way, beyond the darkness so close around us.

"We are called upon to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, for those it calls 'enemy.' For no document from human hands can't make these humans any less our brothers and sisters." Thank you.