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The Obama administration has taken important steps toward repairing the grievous harm that President George W. Bush did to this nation with his lawless and morally repugnant detention policies. President Obama is committed to closing the Guantánamo Bay camp and creating legitimate courts to try detainees. He has rescinded the executive orders and the legal rulings that Mr. Bush used to excuse the abuse of prisoners.

The Defense Department has taken the important step of reversing policy and notifying the International Committee of the Red Cross of the identities of militants who were being held in secret at camps in Iraq and Afghanistan. And Attorney General Eric Holder has appointed a prosecutor to investigate the interrogation of prisoners of the Central Intelligence Agency, whose inhuman treatment was detailed in a long-secret report written by the agency's inspector general in 2004 and released on Monday.

Yet despite these commendable individual steps, Mr. Obama and his political advisers continue to shrink from the broad investigation of the full range of his predecessor's trampling on human rights, civil liberties and judicial safeguards that would allow this country to make sure this sordid history is behind it for good.

Indeed, the administration seemed reluctant to make public the C.I.A. report, which was released under a court order and was heavily censored, with whole pages blacked out — including the four pages of recommendations. Before Mr. Holder announced his investigation, the White House made it clear that it was unhappy with his decision — repeating its sadly familiar line about “looking forward, not backward.”

Mr. Holder displayed real courage and integrity in ordering the investigation. But he stressed that it was limited to the specific interrogations outlined in the C.I.A. report, and did not amount to a full-blown criminal investigation of the Bush-era detention policies.

The interrogations are certainly worthy of criminal investigation. The report describes objectionable and cruel practices well beyond waterboarding. They included threatening a detainee's family members with sexual assault and threatening to kill another's children; the staging of mock executions; and repeatedly blocking a prisoner's carotid artery until he began to faint.

The report said the interrogations generally followed guidelines approved by Mr. Bush's Justice Department, which dedicated itself to finding ways to authorize abuse and evade legal accountability. But it offered a scathing condemnation of those guidelines, which it said diverged "sharply" from the practices of military and police interrogators, and the positions of pretty much everyone else, including the State Department, Congress, other Western governments and human rights groups.

The inspector general said that, in some cases, interrogations exceeded even the Bush Justice Department's shockingly lax standards.

The report offers one more compelling reason for a far broader inquiry into Mr. Bush's lawless behavior. It is possible to sympathize with Mr. Obama's desire to avoid a politically fraught investigation. But the need to set this nation back under the rule of law is no less urgent than it was when he promised to do so in his campaign.

That will not be accomplished by investigating individual interrogators. It will require a fearless airing of how the orders were issued to those men, and who gave them. Only by making public officials accountable under the law can Americans be confident that future presidents will not feel free to break it the way Mr. Bush did.