Panelist Remarks
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This past spring, I participated in the Stanford in Washington Program. I completed my internship at The Center for Victims of Torture, a nonprofit organization that provides counseling and treatment for torture victims at its headquarters in Minneapolis, Minnesota and which has advocacy presence in Washington D.C. The Center for Victims of Torture also operates torture treatment centers in countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Jordan that have high numbers of refugees, and torture victims among their populace. When The Center for Victims of Torture (or CVT) opens up programs in these countries, social workers and psychologists are trained so that there is an organic organization that is administrated by people from that particular country. The Center for Victims of Torture is the only torture treatment center with advocacy presence in Washington, D.C., so our Washington Office serves as the main representative of the National Consortium of Torture Treatment Centers to advocate for anti-torture policies and legislation, accountability for perpetrators of torture and for funding for torture treatment centers in the United States and abroad.

During the 2008 General Presidential Election, the Center for Victims of Torture initiated a “Campaign to Ban Torture.” The goal of this campaign was to have the president elect, whoever it might be, sign an executive order banning torture as one of his first acts in office. The proposed executive order also included provisions requiring that the Army Field Manual become the standard for interrogation. The Campaign built up a coalition of high-ranking government and military officials such as past Secretaries of State, Secretaries of Defense, and CIA interrogators to validate and stand behind the Executive Order. The Campaign was successful, and President Obama signed the Executive Order on his second day in office.

When I came to work at CVT, President Obama had just approved the release of the Bush Administration memos that outlined the “enhanced interrogation techniques” that were used in the interrogation of suspected terrorists. The Obama Administration was debating whether or not to release additional photos of the interrogation methods that were used. CVT is part of a “Stop Torture Now” Coalition that is lead by the ACLU, and that includes many other human rights advocacy groups in Washington DC, such as Human Rights First and Amnesty International. As part of this coalition, I represented CVT at weekly meetings that we held with the goal of creating a unified front on what the best way was to have some sort of accountability for the acts of interrogation that we believed to be clear violations of human rights, while safeguarding the wellbeing of victims who might be retraumatized by the release of such photos. Representing The Center for Victims of Torture gave me an important perspective this ongoing debate, because CVT focuses on the issue from the perspective of our clients, torture victims and survivors who are sometimes adversely affected when photos of torture are released, or if they are called to testify in court. It was incredibly rewarding to participate in these meetings and hear the arguments both for and against different methods of accountability while articulating the need for sensitivity to the wellbeing of the victims.
Honorary guests would occasionally participate in these meetings. During one meeting, an experienced military interrogator spoke to us about his personal experiences interrogating terror suspects. He explained that he believes torture is not only morally wrong, but that it is ineffective as a military strategy. He described that in his experience, it has been important to use techniques such as building rapport with the individual being interrogated, of using subtle methods to gain their trust. He described one man that he interrogated, who at first was extremely hostile and unwilling to provide any information. The interrogator asked the man about his story, and found that he believed that members of his family had been wrongfully killed by US forces. The interrogator offered a sincere apology and listened to the story of the man, as one human being to another. He described to us how the man’s countenance clearly changed after his pain and suffering was acknowledged, and that afterwards, he was much more cooperative. He stressed the importance of treating people with dignity and respect. I attended many such meetings and conferences in which officials and personnel intimately involved with the interrogation process validated that torture is an ineffective means of interrogation.

Aside from the still on-going process of fighting for accountability in the torture that was sanctioned during the Bush Administration, a large part of the work that I did at the Center for Victims of Torture was advocating for Congressional support for the Torture Victims Relief Act (TVRA). This Act authorizes funding for torture treatment centers in the United States and abroad, through a United Nations Voluntary Fund. TVRA did not pass last year because of problems some members of Congress had with the principle of allocating money for these programs through the United Nations. At CVT, our goal was to have the bill passed and on President Obama’s desk to sign on June 26th, which is the United Nations Day in Remembrance of Victims of Torture. I helped to draft letters, and set up meetings with key officials in the White House, asking for their support in moving the bill along. We believed that signing the bill on June 26th would be a signal to the world that the United States is a country that provides money for torture treatment, rather than a country that creates torture victims. We believed this was a symbol of our commitment to Human Rights and a step towards rebuilding US leadership on the important issue of torture.

My job was to help build coalitions in Congress to sign on to our bill. I worked for hours contacting Congressional and Senate offices, setting up meetings with staffers and Congressional members to petition their support for the Torture Victims Relief Act. We worked across the aisle, bringing in both Republicans and Democrats who had strong records on human rights issues. I worked with the Director of our Office to organize a Congressional Hearing on TVRA. We brought in witnesses including physicians and social workers who worked with torture victims, and even a torture victim from one of our clinics, to testify of the importance of retaining our commitment to never again use or sanction torture, and to live up to our commitments under international law. Our bill did pass the House of Representatives while I was in Washington, DC, but it has not yet passed the Senate.

The greatest difficulty of working at the Center for Victims of Torture is that torture is an incredibly divisive issue. With the release of the memos, the potential release of the photos of torture, the decision on whether or not to appoint an independent prosecutor to investigate the use of torture by US personnel against terror suspects, I found that it was very difficult for us to
meet with members of Congress. It seemed that legislators did not want to have their name attached to anything with the word “torture” in it. Every day on the news, political pundits would argue over whether torture was effective, whether waterboarding really was torture, whether we should keep “looking at the past” or “moving on to the future.” It was rewarding for me to be part of an organization that worked to build up a coalition of people who could testify that waterboarding is torture, and that these memos did constitute a violation of our international commitments under the Convention Against Torture.

Although we did not come out with a formal position on whether or not we supporting an investigation or truth commissions, we were in strong support of accountability. In seeking to pass TVRA, we also wanted to focus on the treatment of those who have had their human rights violated, and testify that these programs have been incredibly successful in helping these people move on with their lives.

I learned a great deal about how the human rights community works in Washington, DC. How they communicate with other organizations that are out in the field helping people whose human rights have been violated, and how to go about promoting their cause in Congress and with the White House. I was so grateful to have an inside look at how politics works in Washington, DC. I feel it was a necessary experience for me academically. Before my internship, I was excited intellectually by the ideas that I was studying, and I was passionate about defending human rights, but to actually work and advocate for real people who had had their human rights violated was an entirely different experience. I was grateful to have the opportunity to talk to people who care about the issues that I care about and see what paths they have taken to get to where they are now. I would continually ask questions about what University degrees were useful to have, and what sort of experience would help me to get a job in Washington DC after graduation. I made a lot of contacts with people in the human rights community in Washington, DC, and I definitely plan to go back to advocate for human rights after graduate school.