

Americans Believe U.S. Should Not Imprison Innocent People Indefinitely to Extract Information

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Should the United States' military and intelligence agencies be allowed to hold people because they may provide useful intelligence in the war on terror? A new WPO poll finds that most Americans think that the U.S. government does not have the right to hold individuals solely for interrogation. But a majority of Americans believe that innocent people are being kept at U.S. detention centers indefinitely for that purpose.

More than 400 detainees are being held at the U.S. military base on Guantánamo Bay in Cuba. None have been convicted on terrorism-related charges. According to a report published by the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, "the purpose of the detention of most of the detainees is not to bring criminal charges against them but to extract information from them on other terrorism suspects."

The WPO poll gave respondents two scenarios: one involved "an individual in Afghanistan;" the other "an American citizen." In both cases they were told that the person held "is not suspected of having any involvement in terrorism, but the United States suspects this person might have useful information about a terrorist group." They were also told, "suppose, when asked, he denies having such information" They were then asked: "Do you think the United States does or does not have the right to put this person in prison indefinitely as a way of putting pressure on him to talk?"

In both cases, a majority said that the United States should not hold the individual solely for interrogation. Fifty-eight percent said U.S. officials had no right to hold someone captured in Afghanistan while 37 percent said they did have the right. A larger majority of 63 percent said a U.S. citizen could not be detained just to get information while 34 percent thought they could be.

All respondents who answered that the United States did have a right to imprison individuals simply for information were then asked a follow-on question: Did other countries have the right to imprison American citizens to extract information? Only one out of four percent (of the full sample) said other countries had this right, while one out of ten percent said they did not.

Majorities of both Republicans and Democrats—52 percent and 60 percent, respectively—thought the United States had no right to imprison an individual captured in Afghanistan simply to get information. Larger majorities of Republicans and Democrats—60 percent and 70 percent—thought the United States had no right to imprison an American citizen for this purpose.

Respondents were also asked whether they thought the United States did imprison people "who are not suspected of having any involvement in terrorism, but who it suspects might have useful information about a terrorist group." A large, bipartisan majority—72%—replied that they

believed the United States did so. Sixty-eight percent of Republicans and 80 percent of Democrats thought detaining people solely for interrogation was U.S. practice.

Detaining Individuals for Information Purposes

Suppose the US has detained an **individual in Afghanistan/an American citizen** who is not suspected of having any involvement in terrorism, but the US suspects this person might have useful information. Do you think the US does or does not have the right to put this person in prison indefinitely as a way of putting pressure on him to talk?

-Individual in Afghanistan-



-An American citizen-



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If the US does have a right:

Do you think that other countries do or do not have the right to imprison an American citizen who is not suspected of having any involvement in terrorism, but who they suspect might have useful information about a terrorist group?



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