

# Coalition for an Ethical Psychology

human rights – ethics – social justice

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## Reclaiming Our Profession: Psychology Ten Years After 9/11

Next September 11th will mark the end of a difficult and pivotal decade for American psychology. The path taken in the months ahead will help determine whether this period is remembered as the decade that forever tarnished the profession or, instead, as a watershed decade in which psychology firmly established its moral bearings.

Human rights advocates, and increasingly the general public, have come to view our profession as home to the architects, abettors, and practitioners of abusive interrogations -- even torture -- and other ethical violations as part of a national security apparatus run amok. *And they are not wrong.* Regrettably, such misconduct has often overshadowed the very many psychologists who have played valuable roles as dedicated helping professionals, researchers, and educators during this time.

But a profession's legitimacy and reputation are neither established nor maintained by a simple count of those who act decently and responsibly compared to those who do not. Psychology rises or falls depending upon whether principle and integrity are chosen over expediency and opportunism. Such choices are not made solely by individuals and then reflected in their personal actions. Of even more importance, these choices are made by organizational leaders representing the profession as a whole.

It is now well documented that the leadership of the American Psychological Association (APA) has comprehensively failed in this crucial stewardship role. As a result, the larger tragedy does not revolve around particular psychologists who took an abhorrent approach to interrogations, who compromised science for career opportunities, or who succumbed to situational pressures. Disappointingly, our core ethical imperatives in psychology, including bedrock tenets of "do no harm" and informed consent, were cast aside at the highest levels of the APA, in exchange for increased access, status, and funding.

Indeed, over the past several years the evidence of misconduct and questionable judgment within the APA -- primarily through associations with CIA and Department of Defense intelligence operations -- has steadily risen. Like expanding floodwaters, one new revelation has followed another. They now threaten to breach the makeshift dam built piecemeal from APA's denial, stonewalling, intimidation, and double-talk. At risk are not only those who have acted irresponsibly. The casualties may well include many bystanders -- decent and dedicated APA members brought down by misplaced allegiance and trust in their organization's leaders, and non-member psychologists whose practices and careers have been tainted as well.

The ongoing efforts of our fellow "dissident" psychologists to change APA policies have been invaluable. But as this tumultuous decade draws to a close, it is clear that a far broader grassroots movement is needed. APA members and non-member psychologists alike must come together in large and growing numbers and stand firm in their simple demand: "No More, This Must End."

The necessary changes are far-reaching. They will meet resistance at each step, but they are attainable. Otherwise our professional organizations likely will repeat the errors and failures of the last decade during future periods of crisis. New leadership for the psychology profession is crucial. At this point it remains an open question whether the APA is capable of reforming itself, including replacing compromised leadership, or whether new organizational forms will ultimately be needed. At a minimum, accountability for those responsible for wrongdoing is essential. If the APA is to survive as an ethical organization, a restructuring of its governance and bureaucracy is critical, so that processes at all levels become more transparent and power is no longer held in so few hands. A thorough reevaluation of priorities and relations, including links to the military-intelligence establishment, must be undertaken.

This is a tall order, but anything less is unacceptable. The approaching tenth anniversary of 9/11 must coincide with the rebirth of a principled American psychology, truly taking "do no harm" to heart. If not, it may represent a eulogy for our once proud profession. We owe it to those who have tragically suffered at psychology's hands; we owe it to the next generation of psychologists; and we owe it to ourselves.