

White House press conference

Bush defends rendition of detainees to torture regimes

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17 March 2005

At a White House press conference Wednesday, President George W. Bush flatly defended his decision to expand the practice of turning over alleged terrorists to governments that are notorious for torturing prisoners. The rendition of detainees to such regimes is a brazen violation of international law, as well as US laws banning torture.

Those “rendered” to foreign governments are thrown into a legal black hole, subject to indefinite detention without charges, and without access to legal counsel or judicial process. Many of the countries to which the US sends its captives—in some cases, people abducted by CIA operatives working around the world—have been singled out by the US State Department for employing torture to extract information or confessions from prisoners. These include Egypt, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan.

Former American intelligence officials estimate that the CIA has carried out 100 to 150 renditions since the terror attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. Last week, the *New York Times* reported that the Pentagon was preparing to transfer many of the remaining detainees at the Guantánamo Bay concentration camp to prisons in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Yemen.

Toward the beginning of Bush’s 48-minute news conference, a reporter asked:

“Mr. President, can you explain why you approved of and expanded the practice of what’s called ‘rendition’—of transferring individuals out of US custody to countries where human rights groups and your own State Department say torture is common for people in custody?”

Bush replied with the standard administration line, justifying despotic and inhuman methods on the grounds of “national security.” He said: “In the post-9/11 world the United States must make sure we protect our people and our friends from attack.” He then added, lamely, that the US received “promises” from countries that they would not torture those rendered to them by the American authorities.

When the reporter sought to follow up his question, Bush interrupted with some mindless banter, but the journalist persisted, asking: “Well, what is it that Uzbekistan can do in interrogating...?” At that point, Bush cut him off, repeating, “We seek assurances nobody will be tortured when we render a person back to their home country.”

This de facto defense of torture did not prevent Bush, at a later point in the proceedings, in reply to a query about “antipathy to America around the world,” from declaring: “People need to understand we’re a compassionate nation, that we care deeply about suffering...”

The exchange on rendition set the tone for an appearance in which Bush restated his administration’s major policies, both domestic and foreign, and indicated no inclination to retreat or compromise on any significant issue. This despite mounting evidence of broad popular opposition both to the Iraq war and to Bush’s domestic program—in particular, his campaign for the partial privatization of Social Security.

The news conference, which had not been previously scheduled and was only announced early Wednesday morning, several hours before it began, had the appearance of a hastily arranged event, decided on because of political exigencies. Bush’s handlers apparently felt the president had to make an appearance prior to Congress’ two-week Easter recess, which begins Friday, both to shore up support within the ranks of congressional Republicans and intensify pressure on right-wing Democrats to push through the administration’s Social Security policy.

The previous day, Bush’s plan to introduce private investment accounts carved out of a portion of Social Security taxes had failed to win a majority in a non-binding test vote in the Senate. Five Republicans joined the Senate’s 44 Democrats and one independent to vote for a resolution rejecting any Social Security reform that would require “deep benefit cuts or a massive increase in debt.” Bush’s proposals would require both. The resulting 50-50 vote on the resolution was a clear defeat for the administration.

The waffling of some Republicans comes together with opinion polls showing broad disaffection with the administration and its policies. The morning of Bush's press conference, the *Washington Post* published a poll it conducted jointly with ABC News that indicated growing opposition to the war in Iraq.

According to the poll, 53 percent of Americans believe the war is not worth fighting, 57 percent disapprove of Bush's handling of Iraq, and 70 percent say the number of American casualties is an unacceptable price. For the first time in a *Post*-ABC poll, a majority (51 percent) called the war in Iraq a mistake. The poll also showed overwhelming opposition to military action against Iran or North Korea.

A recent Gallup Poll found public support for the Republican-dominated Congress at 37 percent, a drop of 8 percent from the previous month and the lowest showing for Congress since the aftermath of Clinton's impeachment. Bush's approval rating remained at the low level of 52 percent, while only 42 percent were satisfied with the way the country was going.

Other recent polls show a large and growing majority opposed to Bush's plans to divert Social Security taxes into private accounts.

There are also indications that sections of big business are increasingly concerned that Bush's preoccupation with Social Security privatization could jeopardize other planks in the corporate agenda that are worth hundreds of billions in potential profits and windfalls. The *Wall Street Journal* published an article Tuesday headlined, "Congress' Pro-Business Agenda May Stall," which outlined these concerns. In particular, the article worried about the fate of a proposal to limit industry liability for the death and disability resulting from asbestos exposure, the administration's energy bill, a measure to permanently repeal estate taxes, and a bill to restrict medical malpractice suits.

Taken together, these factors explain the reluctance of sections of Republicans in both the House and Senate to line up squarely behind Bush's Social Security plan.

This was the immediate background to the press conference, which began with Bush reaffirming his commitment to fight for his Social Security privatization plan. The previous day, Bush had conducted an interview with selected journalists in which he ruled out any compromise on his plan for private accounts.

While Bush insists he supports Social Security—a point he stressed at his Wednesday press conference—his plan for private accounts is, in fact, a Trojan Horse initiative, championed by the most right-wing sections of the corporate and political establishment long opposed to the federal pension program. If initiated, such accounts would ultimately lead to the bankrupting and disintegration of the

program.

This is why Bush refuses to actually present a concrete plan for his "reform" of the system. He was asked several times at the press conference why he refuses to produce such a plan, and responded by claiming he was simply throwing out some ideas and, in the spirit of good will and non-partisanship, inviting a healthy debate.

In reality, his deliberate befogging of the issue is in line with the basic *modus operandi* of his administration: deception and lies in the service of reaction. Bush and his advisers are seeking to begin the dismantling of Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid—all that remains of the New Deal and Great Society reforms of the previous century—without any open or genuine discussion or debate and behind the backs of the American people.

They calculate—based on the Democrats' record of cowardice and prostration—that they can achieve this aim if they shore up their own Republican ranks and reply on the corporate-controlled media to keep the people in the dark.

Although for much of the news conference Bush appeared even more distracted and incoherent than usual, the substance of his remarks was a hard-line defense of his policies, both abroad and at home. He rejected any timetable for drawing down US troop levels in Iraq and dismissed the significance of Italy's decision to begin withdrawing its troops from the country, declared that Iran had to "totally and permanently" end its nuclear fuel processing and enrichment program or face United Nations sanctions (a position that can only lead to a confrontation and possible military action), reiterated his definition of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, and repeated his threats against Syria.

On domestic affairs, he reaffirmed his support for the death penalty, declared his confidence in Republican House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, the political pit-bull of the Republican right who is under investigation on various corruption charges, reiterated his support for a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriages, and defended the distribution of government-made "news" videos for broadcast by media outlets.



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