

Bush White House declares torture vital to US security policy

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In an extraordinary declaration of the brutality of American foreign policy, the Bush administration denounced a Senate vote to bar the use of torture against prisoners held by the US military. Responding to the passage of an amendment to a Pentagon spending bill—approved by an overwhelming 90-9 vote Wednesday, the White House said the proposal would “restrict the president’s authority to protect Americans effectively from terrorist attack and bring terrorists to justice.”

The statement indicated that Bush would veto the entire appropriation, providing \$440 billion to fund military operations for the next fiscal year, rather than accept the restrictions on interrogation techniques spelled out in the Senate amendment.

The 90-9 vote came on an amendment sponsored by Senator John McCain of Arizona, a Republican and former prisoner of war in Vietnam. McCain, a fervent supporter of the war in Iraq, has opposed the use of torture in military facilities like Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, because it damages US foreign policy interests and could become the pretext for subjecting captured American military personnel to the same techniques in retaliation.

McCain’s amendment had the backing of two dozen former generals and admirals, including former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff John Shalikashvili and former Secretary of State and JCS chairman Colin Powell. Forty-six Republicans, 43 Democrats and one independent voted for the amendment, which was opposed by only nine Republicans. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist voted with McCain and against the White House position.

Frist delayed the introduction of the anti-torture language earlier this summer, maintaining that Congress should not put restrictions on the measures

which the administration felt were necessary to fight the “war on terror.” But the events of the past three months, both in the increasingly bloody stalemate in Iraq and the feeble response of the federal government to the Gulf hurricane crisis, have weakened the Bush administration.

The amendment itself is extremely limited in its scope. It simply prohibits “cruel, inhuman or degrading” treatment of those in the custody of the military and requires that questioning of prisoners detained by the military follow the existing U.S. Army Field Manual on Intelligence Interrogation. No such restrictions would apply to those held by US intelligence agencies, such as the prisoners in the CIA-run detention centers at Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan, Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, and at undisclosed locations elsewhere in the world. Those captives can still be tortured at will.

During the final debate on the amendment, McCain read out a letter from former secretary of state Powell endorsing the measure, which Powell said would address “the terrible public diplomacy crisis created by Abu Ghraib.” It was the first time since his departure from office in January that Powell has publicly opposed the foreign policy of the Bush administration—a measure of the impact of the Iraqi debacle on the US foreign policy and military establishment.

At a press briefing Wednesday, White House spokesman Scott McClellan confirmed that Bush would veto the entire appropriation bill rather than have his power to order torture restricted. McClellan made absurdly contradictory claims, declaring the amendment “unnecessary and duplicative” in view of current administration policy, which supposedly bans torture, and at the same time saying “it would limit the President’s ability as commander-in-chief to

effectively carry out the war on terrorism.”

The McCain amendment originates in an effort by senators with close ties to the Pentagon brass—McCain, in addition to being a celebrated POW, is the son of an admiral—to get the military off the hook for the abuses at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo. In the course of the final debate, McCain cited complaints by top military officers over conflicting signals from the White House about what was permissible in the treatment of prisoners. “Confusion about the rules results in abuses in the field,” he said.

This was a veiled reference to the infamous memos authored by the Bush Justice Department and the White House Legal Counsel’s office—then headed by the current attorney general Alberto Gonzales—that claimed presidential authority to ignore the Geneva Conventions and the International Convention Against Torture, based on Bush’s constitutional powers as commander-in-chief.

Senators supporting the amendment cited the colossal impact of the Abu Ghraib revelations on world public opinion. Republican Lindsey Graham of South Carolina said, “The best thing we can do is give the guidance [the troops] need to make sure we can win the war on terror and never lose the moral high ground.”

One factor in the top-heavy Senate vote was the recent testimony by a former Army captain, Ian Fishback of the 82nd Airborne Division, about systematic beating and mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners in early 2004, near Fallujah, a center of resistance to the US occupation. Fishback and two former sergeants in his unit have come forward, confirming that Abu Ghraib was not an exception, but rather typical of the treatment meted out to hundreds and thousands of prisoners across the country.

Also contributing is the steady stream of revelations about torture at the Guantánamo Bay prison camp. Last month the US press carried reports on widespread hunger strikes among the prisoners at Guantánamo, with as many as 200 prisoners refusing food for as long as 45 days. At least 18 prisoners were hospitalized and several force-fed. The prisoners were protesting the conditions under which they are held, particularly the savage beatings by a notorious squad of military thugs known as IRF. They have also demanded the right to challenge their incarceration before an independent panel, as provided for under the Geneva Conventions,

rather than appearing before the rigged military tribunals set up by the Bush administration.



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