US: Senate Republicans demand probe into leak on CIA's gulag

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Republican leaders in Congress responded this week to the *Washington Post*'s exposure of a global network of CIA prisons by demanding that those responsible for leaking the information be tracked down and punished.

In a letter to the chairmen of the Senate and House intelligence committees, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, Republican of Tennessee, and House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert, Republican of Illinois, wrote, "If accurate, such an egregious disclosure could have long-term and far-reaching damaging and dangerous consequences, and will imperil our efforts to protect the American people and our homeland from terrorist attacks."

The CIA's general counsel has also sent a letter to the Justice Department complaining that a release of classified information occurred in connection with the *Post* article.

The *Post*'s November 2 report on the global gulag created outrage around the world. The conditions in these "black sites," established to circumvent US and international law, are clearly hellish. In certain locations, prisoners, who have never been charged with any crime, are kept in underground cells, in the dark. CIA interrogators are permitted to use such barbaric methods as "water boarding," a kind of mock asphyxiation.

The *Post* revealed that US intelligence was holding some of its allegedly most important captives at a Stalinist-era compound in eastern Europe, and that at least two eastern European nations were hosting these illegal jails.

This latter revelation obliged officials of the European Union to contemplate an investigation into whether European human rights laws were being violated. On November 7, the Council of Europe, a 46-member political organization distinct from the EU, with headquarters in Strasbourg, France, launched its own investigation. The Legal Affairs Committee of its Parliamentary Assembly appointed its chairperson as rapporteur to examine the subject of alleged CIA detention centers.

The Frist-Hastert intervention is a geyser of mud, in the first place, designed to distract attention from the content of the *Post* exposure. At a press conference Thursday, Frist revealed his authoritarian mentality. He told reporters that the damning leak posed a greater threat to "national security" than the existence of secret prisons. "My concern is with leaks of information that jeopardize your safety and security—period," he said.

Asked whether this meant that he was not concerned about investigating the prisons themselves, Frist replied, "I am not concerned about what goes on and I'm not going to comment about the nature of that."

The Republican leaders' effort is also a transparent attempt to manufacture a leak scandal "of their own." Stung by the indictment of Lewis Libby, Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff, on charges associated with revealing the identity of a covert CIA operative, congressional Republicans are trying to make a comeback by asserting that the *Post* story has endangered CIA operations and operatives. In their letter to the House and Senate committees, Frist and Hastert had asked, "What is the actual and potential damage done to the national security of the United States and our partners in the global war on terror?"

Neglected by all concerned, including the media, is the fact that the real crimes committed in both episodes involve US government officials: in the Libby case, an attempt to smear or silence a critic of the Bush drive to war; in the *Post*'sstory, the organization of an illegal prison network worthy of a military dictatorship.

How much of a winner the congressional Republicans' cause will be with the public—the defense of the right of CIA interrogators, i.e., torturers, to go about their business undisturbed—is questionable. On his radio program, right-wing buffoon Rush Limbaugh praised the "young men and women putting their lives on the line in these sites." He did not immediately indicate how CIA operatives, well guarded by the military, in charge of disoriented, shackled and abused individuals kept in dark holes in the ground, were putting "their lives on the line."

A more general aim of the Frist-Hastert letter is to intimidate opposition to the government's policies and, specifically, discourage the media from publishing exposés of its actions. In their letter, the Senate Majority Leader and the House Speaker wrote, "The leaking of classified information by employees of the United States government appears to have increased in recent years, establishing a dangerous trend that, if not addressed swiftly and firmly, likely will worsen."

In reality, confronted by a government with an unprecedented mania for secrecy, the press has no choice, if it is not to swallow whole the official line, but to rely on leaked material, including classified material. In such circumstances, the publication of information that the government does not wish to be made public is an elementary democratic obligation.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan declined to say whether the president endorsed the proposed probe, but he added,

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"The leaking of classified information is a serious matter and ought to be taken seriously."

The notion of a bicameral investigation into a leak of politically damaging material is absurd on the face of it. There have been fewer than half a dozen such probes in US history; they include probes into the conduct of the US Civil War and the Iran-Contra scandal.

A great deal of confusion followed the dispatch of the Frist-Hastert letter. In fact, some preceded it, as an item in *The Hill*, the newspaper devoted to congressional doings, discloses. Apparently, someone in Frist's office leaked news of the joint letter about leaks before Hastert had read and approved its contents.

The House Speaker hurriedly did so, but meanwhile CNN had reported that Trent Lott, Republican of Mississippi, was claiming that a Republican senator might have revealed the information about the "black sites"! Lott, embittered since the loss of his position as Senate Majority Leader and something of a loose cannon, told reporters the information in the *Post* piece was "the same as that given to Republican senators in a closed-door briefing by Vice President Dick Cheney last week. 'Every word that was said in there went right to the newspaper,' he said. 'We can't keep our mouths shut.' "

This revelation made Frist hesitant about signing the demand for an investigation into the leak, concerned "over the possibility of endangering a Republican senator by calling for the investigation," according to *The Hill*. "Frist told a gaggle of reporters at around 5 p.m. that he had not signed the letter. He did not sign it until 5:45 p.m.; but even after then, it was not certain whether Frist had signed the letter. Frist's office compounded the confusion by informing some reporters that he had signed the letter but also decided not to release it."

Senate Republicans seemed less than unified around the demand for an inquiry into the CIA gulag story. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, when asked whether there should be a probe into the leaked story or into the prisons, "rolled his eyes and replied: 'How about both? I'd like to know why we've got secret prisons and what oversight precautions we have.' Graham said it was 'imperative we regain the moral high ground and having secret prisons come out in the *Washington Post* is not a good way to regain it.' "

On Thursday, Kansas Republican Pat Roberts, head of the Senate intelligence committee, said he would "respectfully" ask Frist to back off from his request for an immediate inquiry into the *Post* leak until the Justice Department had carried out its own probe. When asked how long the latter process might take, Roberts joked, "Decades."

More material emerged this week about CIA methods of interrogation. A classified 2004 report from the agency's inspector general, John Helgerson, warned that certain of the interrogation techniques approved following the September 11 attacks could violate the international Convention Against Torture, drafted by the UN. The convention, signed by the US, prohibits inflicting severe mental or physical pain or suffering, and any actions that are "cruel, inhuman or degrading." This revelation comes only a few days after Bush's fatuous "We do not torture" remarks.

In his report, Helgerson apparently pointed out that techniques like "water boarding" went well beyond those authorized by the military to use against prisoners of war and constituted, if not torture in his view, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

The *New York Times* notes: "The officials who described the report said it discussed particular techniques used by the CIA. against particular prisoners, including about three dozen terror suspects being held by the agency in secret locations around the world. They said it referred in particular to the treatment of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who is said to have organized the Sept. 11 attacks and who has been detained in a secret location by the CIA since he was captured in March 2003. Mr. Mohammed is among those believed to have been subjected to waterboarding, in which a prisoner is strapped to a board and made to believe that he is drowning."

Anxiety sparked by the disaster in Iraq and the long-term, global consequences of illegal and reckless policies, as well as concerns about legal liability, lie behind the spate of leaked classified material, including the *Post* story about the CIA prisons. Certain fissures are opening up in the political and intelligence establishment, as various figures seek to position or reposition themselves.

Vice President Cheney is proving an inviting target for critics within the ruling elite. In October, Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, former chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell, accused Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld of operating a "cabal" that had hijacked US foreign and military policy. Last week, Wilkerson returned to this theme, with a specific allegation. During a National Public Radio interview, he charged that Cheney—and his new assistant (and Lewis Libby's replacement) David Addington—were responsible for directives that had led US soldiers to abuse prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan. That would constitute criminal activity on the vice president's part.

Wilkerson told NPR, "There was a visible audit trail from the vice president's office through the Secretary of Defense, down to the commanders in the field, authorizing practices that led to the abuse of detainees." He added that Powell had assigned him to look into the matter after news reports of US troops abusing prisoners. Wilkerson claimed he was "privy to the paperwork, both classified and unclassified, that the secretary of State asked me to assemble on how this all got started."

He called Cheney's new chief of staff, Addington, "a staunch advocate of allowing the president in his capacity as commander-in-chief to deviate from the Geneva Conventions."

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