

Wall Street Journal defends torture

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The editorial board of the *Wall Street Journal* has again come forward as the mouthpiece of the most criminal and ruthless sections of the American ruling elite. The newspaper's lead editorial on November 12, "A 'Tortured' Debate," constitutes an unambiguous defense of torture as an indispensable instrument of American policy.

The *Journal's* intervention comes amidst an acrimonious debate within the political establishment and the media over the government's official policy on torture. In October, the Senate passed an amendment to a military appropriations bill declaring that no individual in US custody may be subjected to "cruel, inhuman or degrading" treatment. There is concern within a section of the ruling class that the US government's open embrace of detainee abuse will undermine the ability of Washington to posture as a champion of democratic rights in justifying its military and diplomatic interventions abroad.

The Bush administration has vowed to veto the bill if the language is included, declaring that it would "undermine presidential authority" and tie the hands of US agencies. Speaking for the dominant section of the American financial elite, the *Wall Street Journal* has come down firmly on the side of torture: "[W]e can't win the war on terror without good intelligence," the editorial declares, and "there won't be good intelligence without aggressive interrogations."

The newspaper states that the amendment, sponsored by Republican Senator John McCain, "would effectively bar all stressful interrogation techniques. The danger for American security is that this would telegraph to every terrorist in the world that he has absolutely nothing to fear from silence should he fall into US hands."

In defending the use of what are euphemistically called "stressful interrogation techniques," the *Journal's* concern is not preventing a terrorist attack or

making the country more "secure." This is the rationale used by every petty despot who employs torture. Rather, the *Journal* is speaking for a section of the American ruling elite that is determined to eliminate all constraints on the pursuit of the interests of American imperialism.

The *Journal* goes even further than the Bush administration, which has pushed for the Senate amendment to be re-worded to create an explicit exemption for the CIA. This is "an unsatisfactory compromise," the editorial asserts, since "many Defense Department methods would be barred."

"US tactics should be morally defensible based on who the detainee is, not which department is doing the interrogation," the newspaper writes. That is, any government agency should be allowed to torture prisoners, so long as the abuse falls within the framework of the so-called "war on terror." This presumably also includes the torture of US citizens.

The *Wall Street Journal* has long been in the forefront of developing ideological justifications for repudiating international law. It has argued that any individuals captured in Afghanistan, Iraq and future engagements in the "global war on terror" be automatically denied prisoner-of-war status and other protections under the Geneva Conventions.

The tortured logic employed by the *Journal* in defending torture was perhaps most evident in its declaration that, by ignoring the Geneva Conventions, the US was actually respecting international law. The editorial correctly points out that "any form of manipulation, including positive reinforcements such as better rations, are forbidden when it comes to interrogating legitimate POWs." Therefore, by unilaterally denying that its prisoners are "legitimate POWs," the US government has avoided violating the rights guaranteed to POWs—since its prisoners have no rights to violate! It was "respecting, not skirting,

international law when it refused to classify them as such.”

Of course, the denial of POW status to prisoners is itself a violation of international law, but this is of little concern to the *Wall Street Journal*. The category of “enemy combatant,” which has no legal standing, was invented by the Bush administration to justify denying its prisoners any rights whatsoever. Even the Bush administration stated that prisoners it captured during the Iraq war would be considered POWs; however, this has not prevented it from authorizing techniques that are clearly illegal.

While it attempts to make a distinction between what are merely “stressful interrogations techniques” and torture, the *Journal* explicitly defends the worst abuses carried out by American troops and intelligence agents. “As for ‘torture,’” we are told, “it is simply perverse to conflate the amputations and electrocutions Saddam once inflicted at Abu Ghraib with the lesser abuses committed by rogue American soldiers there, much less with any authorized US interrogation techniques.”

Lesser abuses? What is meant by “lesser abuses”? Perhaps the editors are referring to the death by asphyxiation—in a “stress position” compared by doctors to a crucifixion—of a detainee by a CIA agent at Abu Ghraib, recently reported by *New Yorker* magazine? Or maybe they are referring to the rapes of an Iraqi boy and a woman detained by US troops at Abu Ghraib, the evidence of which the US government has refused to release to the public? Or perhaps the “lesser abuses” are the numerous deaths that have been documented in Iraq and Afghanistan, resulting from prolonged beating by US forces?

Indeed, one of the most well known of the horrific photographs from Abu Ghraib was of the electric-shock torture of a hooded Iraqi man with electrical wires attached to his genitals, arms outstretched. Since the Abu Ghraib photographs were released in 2004, there has been a continual stream of evidence of beatings and other forms of abuse carried out by American soldiers. None of this is really “torture,” according to the *Journal*.

Millions of people around the world have reacted with horror and outrage to the torture carried out by US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. The dismissive attitude that the *Journal* takes toward these events highlights the utter contempt that the American ruling elite has for

the democratic rights of the world’s population.

As for the techniques explicitly authorized by the Bush administration, among which the *Journal* includes “wearing a hood, exposure to heat and cold, and the rarely authorized ‘waterboarding,’ which induces a feeling of suffocation,” these are merely “psychological techniques designed to break a detainee.” But what does torture consist of if not precisely such techniques “designed to break a detainee?”

In a rare moment of honesty, the newspaper admits that there have been many abuses, “probably hundreds of them,” in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, “there have also been more than 70,000 detainees,” it reasons. “In other words, the rate of prisoner abuse compares favorably with the US civilian detention system....” The editors say more here than perhaps they would want, highlighting the fact that the American prison system itself is plagued by systematic abuse against prisoners, in which beatings are not an uncommon phenomenon.

The *Journal*’s most recent defense of torture comes less than two weeks after the *Washington Post* published an article documenting the existence of an extensive secret prison network run by the CIA, in which the agency is certainly carrying out regular abuse of its prisoners. Congressional Republicans have responded to the report by demanding an investigation...not of the prisons themselves, but of the source of the leak to the *Post*.

The determined defense of torture from within the administration and its ideological defenders highlights the fact that the abuse of prisoners held by the United States is not the work of rogue soldiers. It is the outcome of deliberate policy authorized at the highest levels of the American state. The individuals who are responsible for this policy, as well as their media supporters who have promoted it, stand exposed before the world as war criminals.



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