

Bush defends torture

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President George Bush on Friday categorically defended his authorization of interrogation methods defined by international and US law and viewed the world over as torture.

At a previously unscheduled Oval Office meeting with the press, Bush responded to an article published the previous day by the *New York Times* revealing the existence of two secret Justice Department memos from 2005 explicitly sanctioning the use of such methods as head-slapping, subjecting detainees to freezing cold, and applying the simulated drowning technique known as water-boarding.

One of the memos declared that none of the torture techniques then being used by the Central Intelligence Agency against alleged terrorists constituted “cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.” This legal opinion, issued by the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel, was obtained to give the administration legal cover to flout a pending congressional bill banning torture and defining it as “cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.” That bill was eventually passed in December of 2005.

The *Times* article, citing unnamed officials who were briefed on the memos, also reported that the administration has resumed holding prisoners in secret overseas prisons run by the CIA.

At his press appearance, Bush made his standard pro-forma disavowal: “This government does not torture people.” He added, “We stick to US law and our international obligations.”

Significantly, Bush chose to use the phrase “international obligations” rather than “international law.” This is not a small matter, since the interrogation methods Bush has authorized and continues to defend are flagrant violations of the Geneva Conventions and international conventions against torture and cruel and degrading treatment.

Bush began his remarks by declaring, “When we find someone who may have information about a potential attack, you bet we are going to detain them and you bet that we are going to question them.” He then sought to foist responsibility for his use of torture onto the American people, saying, “Because the American people expect us to find out information, actionable intelligence, so we can

defend them.”

He continued, in chilling words worthy of a Gestapo commandant: “There are highly trained professionals questioning these extremists and terrorists. We have professionals who are trained in this kind of work...”

Bush went on say that “the techniques that we used have been fully disclosed to appropriate members of the US Congress.” He concluded by declaring his intention to continue his torture program, saying, “The American people expect their government to take action to protect them from further attack. And that is exactly what this government is doing. And that is exactly what we will continue to do.”

Bush took no questions from the assembled reporters.

Other administration officials acknowledged the existence of the secret memos revealed by the *New York Times*, but refused to disclose or discuss their contents, under the pretext of their classified status and the interests of “national security.”

White House Press Secretary Dana Perino confirmed that the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel wrote a previously undisclosed February 5, 2005 memo, but claimed that the memo did not contradict or reverse a public memo issued by the Justice Department in 2004 declaring torture to be “abhorrent.”

She refused to say whether the administration considered such methods as water-boarding or head-slapping to constitute torture.

White House Homeland Security Adviser Fran Townsend provided, perhaps unwittingly, some sense of the brutal procedures employed against alleged terrorists imprisoned by the US. She told CNN television, “We start with the least harsh measures first. It stops... if someone becomes cooperative.”

White House spokesman Tony Fratto reiterated the administration’s refusal to confirm or deny specific interrogation techniques, giving the standard line that to do so would be a boon to “our enemies.” In fact, the government’s blanket of secrecy over its torture methods is designed to keep the American people in the dark.

Fratto went on to attack the *New York Times* for publishing the exposé, saying that with the “publication of this kind of

information” we have “chipped away at the safety and security of America.”

The memos disclosed by the *Times* are part of a series, going back to the infamous “torture” memo secretly drafted in 2002 and exposed in 2004, following the Abu Ghraib revelations, which narrowed the definition of torture to techniques that cause organ failure. Ever since, the administration has been providing pseudo-legal guidelines defining torture and “cruel, inhuman and degrading” treatment in such a way as to evade court rulings and congressional mandates and continue its sadistic abuse of prisoners.

After the Supreme Court in June of 2006 struck down Bush’s military commissions and ruled that all prisoners held by the US, including alleged Al Qaeda terrorists, fall under the Geneva Conventions’ provisions banning torture and abusive treatment, Bush issued a new executive order authorizing “enhanced interrogation techniques.”

This was followed by the passage of the Military Commissions Act in October 2006, which gave congressional sanction for the administration’s policy of indefinite detention, drumhead military tribunals and interrogation methods defined under US and international law as torture, while shielding it from prosecution. It also gave the president authority to “interpret” the Geneva Conventions.

Former prisoners held in secret CIA jails or in the US military prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba have testified to being subjected to systematic torture. They have complained of being denied sleep, being barred from seeing daylight, being left naked in tiny, suffocating or freezing cells, being forced to stand for hours in painful positions, or being subjected to a mind-shattering barrage of loud music.

Earlier this year, the FBI released some emails from 2004 sent by agents returning from deployments to Guantánamo in which they denounced the abuse of prisoners they witnessed.

A measure of the political degeneracy and complicity of the entire American political establishment in such monstrous crimes is the lack of any serious response to Bush’s adamant defense of torture. On Friday’s evening news broadcasts, Bush’s White House appearance was not even reported by two networks, CBS and ABC, and NBC made it the third story. All three devoted the bulk of their broadcasts to the admission by US track star Marion Jones that she had used steroids.

The Democratic response has been muted and craven. As Bush and other administration officials have emphasized, at least some leading congressional Democrats were briefed on the 2005 memos and informed of the interrogation program approved by the White House.

One of those is Senator John D. Rockefeller IV, the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee. Following the publication of the *New York Times* article, Rockefeller wrote to Peter Keisler, the acting attorney general, asking for copies of all opinions on interrogation since 2004. He was careful in his letter and his statements on the matter to gloss over the fact that he was briefed on the torture program.

Similarly, Rep. John Conyers, the Democratic chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, wrote to Keisler, calling the 2005 memos “troubling” and demanding copies of the opinions. Conyers said his committee would hold hearings on the matter.

Senator Patrick Leahy, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said he would question Bush’s nominee for attorney general, Michael Mukasey, on his views on interrogations when Mukasey comes before his committee for confirmation hearings later this month. He did not, however, say he would let Bush’s defense of torture stand in the way of Mukasey’s confirmation.

Mukasey is an outspoken supporter of Bush’s assertion of the right to hold individuals, including US citizens, in indefinite military detention simply by declaring them to be “unlawful enemy combatants.” As a judge on the US District Court for the Southern District of New York, Mukasey ruled that Jose Padilla, a US citizen, could be held indefinitely by the military. Padilla was subsequently tortured during his three-and-a-half years in a military brig.

No Democrat has suggested that any serious measures be taken against Bush and his co-conspirators. There have been no calls for impeachment, criminal prosecutions—which are mandated by the Geneva Conventions against government officials who authorize torture—or any other actions to hold the Bush administration accountable for flouting court rulings and breeching both international and domestic law.

The Democrats are, in fact, entirely complicit in the crimes of the Bush administration. They knew of the illegal and barbaric methods being employed, and tacitly approved them.

Any congressional probes of US torture will come to nothing. They will be exercises in cover-up and damage control, just like the congressional sideshows mounted by the Democrats since taking control of Congress into the war in Iraq and the police-state measures of the administration at home.



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