

US Senator Carl Levin speaks on torture at the University of Michigan

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US Senator Carl Levin spoke on February 18 at the University of Michigan Law School on the subject of “Torture, Rule of Law and Security.” In his remarks, Levin (Democrat from Michigan) presented himself as an opponent of torture, but was confronted by a number of hostile questions from the audience, including from a member of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE)

Students, professors and members of the general public crowded the aisles and exits of the lecture hall in which Levin spoke, reflecting widespread popular disgust for the policies of torture pursued by the US government.

Addressing the students, Levin criticized torture mainly by arguing that it encumbers the “war on terror,” a euphemism for securing the strategic interests of American imperialism abroad. Levin and the rest of the Democratic Party accept the premises of the “war on terror” completely. The senator argued that the use of torture may “harden the psychological resistance” of a detainee, thereby frustrating efforts to extract reliable intelligence.

“Intelligence is key” to preventing a terrorist attack, Levin said. In fighting against “armed extremists who believe they have a one-way ticket to heaven,” the United States needs the sympathy of potential informers all over the world. With world public opinion embittered by American use of torture, according to Levin, few foreign citizens will report a terrorist conspiracy against the United States.

Levin’s preoccupation with the impracticality of torture as a means of fighting the “war on terror” reveals that his perspective is one concerned less with the morality or legality of torture, and more with its effectiveness for furthering the interests of the American ruling class at home and abroad.

Levin and other sections of the political establishment believe that the American government can more effectively pursue its political, economic and military interests by maintaining the image of the US as a defender of freedom and liberty—an image that has been irreparably damaged by Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib.

In a question-and-answer period following Levin’s

remarks, a member of the ISSE pointed out that members of the Senate Intelligence Committee—on which Senator Levin has served for more than a decade—were briefed on the administration’s use of “waterboarding and rendition” in September 2002. If leading Democrats knew about torture yet failed to substantially oppose it, the student asked, how could Levin “distinguish, within the Democratic Party, between fear of being labeled ‘soft on terror,’ and complicity if not agreement with torture?”

This was a question for which Levin could not provide an answer, and he chose to evade it. Levin began stating a fact that has no bearing at all on the question that was asked: Democrats, he said, were not in charge of congressional intelligence committees in 2002. Members of these committees, he added, are bound to secrecy; had any of them been briefed on torture they would have been incapable of reporting the information disclosed. Even so, Levin insisted that he could not recall receiving any information on torture while on the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Late last year, Joby Warrick and Dan Eggen published articles in the *Washington Post* confirming that current House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Representative Jane Harman, and Senators Bob Graham and John D. Rockefeller, all Democrats, were briefed on the techniques then being employed by the CIA. They were furthermore briefed on the existence of tapes documenting this torture. It is extremely unlikely that Levin, a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee and the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, was deprived of this information.

The use of waterboarding did not become public knowledge until September 2006, and the tapes were kept a secret until last year.

Following Levin’s remarks, the questions posed by other students at the University of Michigan reflected popular frustration with the unwillingness of the Democratic Party to oppose the Bush administration on any major issue, in particular the sweeping attacks on fundamental democratic rights, torture, and the mounting threats of war with Iran. Two students asked why Levin had voted with the most

bellicose of Republicans to label the Iranian Revolutionary Guard a “terrorist organization,” and why Congress was incapable of guaranteeing habeas corpus for prisoners.

The first student to ask a question observed that Democrats had facilitated the policies of the Bush Administration by voting for legislation abrogating democratic rights and confirming the appointment of officials known to condone torture. Levin could only reply that “many in Congress fear being labeled as soft on terror.”

Another member of the audience asked why officials had not been speaking more publicly against torture. Following this, a law student who said he had “spent a considerable amount of time on the Senate floor” described his own experience at a Senate “debate” on the issue of torture, at which “about five senators” had been present. He asked, on behalf of the student body, “Why should we have any faith that this election, that either party, will resolve the question of torture?”

Responding to a student who asked why Democrats would not employ filibusters to counter legislation abrogating civil rights, Levin argued filibusters were simply “too time-consuming.”

Throughout his remarks, Levin was desperate to portray the practice of torture as the unique initiative of the Bush administration; he assigned all culpability to the executive branch. A review of the voting record shows instead that Senate Democrats over the last 7 years repeatedly voted for or failed to oppose legislation establishing the legal and political framework within which torture now takes place.

In October 2001, every Democratic senator except two voted to authorize the infamous Patriot Act, which contains numerous and severe curtailments of democratic rights. The Senate voted unanimously to renew the Act in 2005, and following a further modification of the Act, extended it indefinitely in 2006, with only nine Democrats opposing.

In October 2002, more Senate Democrats voted to authorize the invasion of Iraq than Democrats and Republicans together opposed it—a total of 29. Among those who voted for the war were Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, and Christopher Dodd, all of whom sought the 2008 Democratic Party presidential nomination, as well as Harry Reid, now the Democratic Senate majority leader.

In September 2004, 17 of the 44 voting Democrats in the Senate authorized the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. In the House of Representatives, 186 Democrats voted to create the department, while only 3 opposed.

In February 2005, six Senate Democrats voted to confirm Alberto Gonzales as attorney general, even though he was the known author of two memos calling the Geneva Conventions “obsolete” and openly arguing for the

employment of torture by agents of the US.

The Military Commissions Act of 2006, which establishes a system of military tribunals to try prisoners designated as “unlawful enemy combatants” and explicitly denies them the right of habeas corpus, was passed after Senate Democrats deliberately refused to mount a filibuster. In the Senate, 12 of the 44 voting Democrats authorized the passage of the Act, which effectively gave congressional blessing to the system of rendition, torture, and secret detention established by the Bush administration.

After the Democrats had achieved majorities in both legislative houses, the Senate voted in November 2007 to confirm Michael B. Mukasey as attorney general, with the support of several Democrats. The major issue in Mukasey’s nomination was his refusal to condemn waterboarding as torture.

Levin concluded his lecture at the University of Michigan by urging students opposed to torture to vote for Democratic candidates in the upcoming elections. “If you’re against torture,” said Levin, “you know who you need to elect.”

On the contrary, anyone horrified by the practice of torture by the US government should place no confidence in the Democratic Party to put an end to it, and should reject attempts by Levin and other Democrats to distance themselves publicly from crimes for which they share responsibility. On every fundamental question facing workers and students in the 2008 elections, the Democratic and Republican candidates stand in agreement.



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