

# Bush vetoes bill outlawing torture techniques

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On Saturday, US President George W. Bush vetoed a law that would have banned the CIA from using certain torture techniques. In doing so, he affirmed once again the utter criminality of his administration.

Bush's veto sends back to Congress an intelligence authorization bill that would require the CIA to use only those techniques approved by the Army Field Manual. The effect of the bill would be to ban waterboarding, which involves the induced drowning of the prisoner, and other forms of torture.

In a radio address on Saturday, Bush defended his decision with the standard mix of lies and fear mongering. He said that the bill "would take away one of the most valuable tools in the war on terror—the CIA program to detain and question key terrorist leaders and operatives." Without providing evidence, he claimed that the CIA interrogation program had stopped several terrorist attacks.

Bush went on to claim that the "specialized interrogation procedures" used by the CIA—that is, waterboarding and other forms of torture—are all "safe and lawful techniques."

This is in fact a lie. These measures are all illegal under international and US law. UN special rapporteur on torture Manfred Nowak insisted last month that waterboarding "is absolutely unacceptable under international human rights law." As for the notion that it is safe, even US director of national intelligence Mike McConnell has acknowledged that "taken to its extreme, [the consequences of waterboarding] could be death; you could drown someone."

Stating that he wanted the CIA to have the ability to use a wide variety of techniques, not just waterboarding, Bush said that the bill "would eliminate all the alternative procedures we've developed to question the world's most dangerous and violent terrorists." The Army Field Manual explicitly bans mock executions, forced nakedness and sexual assault,

electric shock, and sensory and sleep deprivation. Bush did not indicate which of these techniques he considers necessary.

"We have no higher responsibility than stopping terrorist attacks," Bush concluded. "And this is no time for Congress to abandon practices that have a proven record of keeping America safe."

Bush routinely argues that the "highest responsibility" of the US president is to protect the American people and prevent terrorist attacks. Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton has recently adopted similar language. In fact, the constitutional responsibility of the president is to uphold the Constitution and execute the laws passed by Congress.

In the last months of his administration, Bush is seeking to defend and consolidate the most odious and illegal practices that have been developed over the past eight years, including torture and domestic spying. Last month, the administration openly acknowledged for the first time that it had used waterboarding on three prisoners. The administration is pressing Congress to pass a law that will permanently expand domestic warrantless wiretapping powers while granting immunity to telecommunications companies that participated in the government's programs.

The position of the Democratic Party reflects certain divisions within the American ruling elite over policy. In particular, there are those who believe that the open defense of torture—torture has long been used covertly in different ways under administrations of both political parties—is extremely damaging to the image of the United States at home and abroad.

In their remarks opposing the veto decision, leading Democrats repeatedly referred to the support given the bill by 43 retired generals and admirals and 18 former top government officials. Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein, a member of the Senate Intelligence

Committee, said that Bush had ignored the advice of these figures. “Torture is a black mark against the United States,” she said.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said that Bush had rejected warnings that the CIA’s techniques “elicit unreliable information, put US troops at risk and undermine our counterinsurgency efforts.” The reference to “counterinsurgency efforts” is key. Reid’s concern is that the open use of torture only increases the hatred of millions of people in Iraq and other targets of US aggression, undermining US military efforts. Similarly, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi warned that the techniques “undermine our nation’s moral authority.”

The FBI has long opposed the use of waterboarding and similar methods on the grounds that they do not produce reliable information—since the prisoner will say anything to stop the torture.

There are a number of factors behind the administration’s insistence that no constraints be placed on the CIA’s interrogation policy. First, there is real concern that any move to make certain methods illegal would open up a debate over their previous legality. In ordering waterboarding, Bush and other administration officials stand guilty of violating domestic and international law, for which severe sanctions are included in the US War Crimes Act.

Second, the Republican Party is eager to run in the elections on the issues of “national security” and terrorism. It is significant that Republican candidate John McCain reversed his past association with anti-torture legislation by voting against the intelligence authorization bill because it included the language restricting CIA operations.

More fundamentally, the Bush administration is determined to defend the principle of unrestrained executive power in authorizing the US military and intelligence agencies to operate without any legal constraints. References to the “war on terror” and “national security” have nothing to do with supposed threats against the US or “ticking time bomb scenarios.”

Within the framework of the American political establishment, these are code words for the willingness to use military force to defend the interests of the American ruling class internationally. In particular, torture is not used to gain information from would be terrorists, but as a tool in suppressing and intimidating

any opposition to American militarism—at home or abroad.

The great advantage of the Bush administration in its conflict with the Democrats is that the administration represents more directly the interests of American capitalism. Under conditions of economic crisis and growing challenges to US interests abroad, the utter ruthlessness of the Bush administration reflects its determination to use repression and violence wherever and whenever it is necessary.

The Democrats are no less committed to the defense of these interests than the Republicans, but they seek to posture as critics of the administration. They want the ends, but are worried about the domestic and international consequences of the means used to reach these ends.

For this reason, the Democrats are constantly vacillating, but always there when it counts to facilitate war and domestic repression. Leading Democrats have been complicit from the beginning in supporting the policy of torture. They are adamantly opposed to any measures that would hold anyone accountable for these actions, since they are themselves complicit in them.

Bush is confident, with good reason, that by ritualistically repeating the mantra of the “war on terror,” he will succeed in cowing the Democrats into abandoning their attempt to curtail presidential powers.

Leading Democrats in the House of Representatives have indicated that an agreement on wiretapping is likely to pass this week, and it will include everything demanded by the administration. While some Democrats are threatening to try to override the veto on the intelligence authorization bill, they know they do not have the required two-thirds majority in either house of Congress. In the end, Democrats will pass an intelligence bill without the language on torture.



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