

US Secretary of State Rice defends torture at Google event

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US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice found herself compelled on Thursday to defend the Bush administration's use of waterboarding—a potentially fatal method of induced drowning used to break the resistance of detainees—claiming that America was in a “different place” in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, while insisting that the government's actions were consistent with US law and international treaties.

The backhanded defense of torture by Washington's chief spokesperson on the world stage came in response to a pointed question from the audience at a “town hall meeting” organized at the headquarters of Google Inc., the Internet search giant, in Mountain View, California.

Rice's statement, the most extensive she has ever made on the issue of torture, followed the release earlier this week of a Department of Justice Inspector General's report that included detailed accounts by agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation who objected to sickening forms of torture that were inflicted on detainees at the US prison camp in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. The nature of these so-called “enhanced interrogation techniques” was made clear by the agents, creating what they called a “war crimes file” in which these reports were compiled.

Also included in the report was the revelation that senior Justice Department officials communicated the concerns raised by the FBI agents directly to Rice, who was then Bush's national security adviser, along with the warning that the brutal practices at Guantánamo were “gravely damaging...the rule of law.”

As the report makes clear, the warning had no impact whatsoever on the grisly activities being carried out in US detention camps and secret prisons, and the FBI agents themselves were quietly ordered to close their “war crimes file” and stop making critical reports on the actions of CIA, military and private contractor interrogators.

Rice appeared before the Google audience together with visiting British Foreign Secretary David Miliband, who traveled with her to California following meetings at the State Department in Washington. Earlier, the two had joined to threaten new economic sanctions against Iran over its alleged failure to offer full disclosure to the International Atomic Energy Agency over its nuclear program.

Pointing to what she said were economic dislocations resulting from existing US, European and UN sanctions, Rice commented—apparently in reference to the military option that the US administration continuously insists remains “on the table”—“They are already paying consequences and, of course, there are other possible courses available to us.”

After a panel discussion in which Rice and Miliband fielded queries from Google Senior Vice President David Drummond, the audience of Google employees was invited to ask their own questions from floor microphones.

One of the first employees asked Rice: “If an American held by another country were subjected to simulated drowning by waterboarding, would that shock your conscience and would you consider that torture?” He continued by asking Miliband to what extent US use of the torture method

against detainees had created a “strain between the United States and your government.”

Much of the audience responded to the question with applause.

Rice dodged the specific question, but spoke at length in defense of the administration's interrogation methods, framing them as a necessary response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

“The fact is that after September 11 [we did] whatever was legal in the face of not just the attacks of September 11, but the anthrax attacks that followed,” she said. “We were in an environment in which saving America from the next attack was of paramount concern; but even in that environment President Bush made it very clear that we were going to live up to our legal responsibilities at home and to our treaty obligations abroad.”

Earlier in her remarks, Rice had claimed that for her, during her tenure in Washington, every day had been “September 12,” the universal rationale offered by the Bush administration for wars of aggression, extraordinary rendition, torture, illegal domestic spying and other attacks on democratic rights.

Of course, “September 10”—the period leading up to the terrorist attacks—does not feature in this propaganda narrative. According to numerous accounts, then-National Security Adviser Rice bore major responsibility for dismissing concrete and urgent warnings from top US intelligence officials that a terrorist attack was imminent.

Seven months afterward, she voiced the opinion in a speech at the Johns Hopkins School of International Studies that 9/11 presented an “enormous opportunity” for Washington “to create a new balance of power.” By this time, she and the rest of the administration were already well along in their preparation for a war of aggression against Iraq, using fabricated charges concerning terrorist ties and weapons of mass destruction as their pretext.

Rice's addition of the anthrax attacks to 9/11 as justification for doing “whatever was legal,” in her words, is peculiar to say the least. It was quickly established that these attacks had no connection to Al Qaeda, and the perpetrators—who have never been identified—were generally believed to be right-wing domestic terrorists. The anthrax-laden mailings targeted Democratic leaders in the Senate and sections of the media. The weapons-grade anthrax itself was available only to a limited number of people involved in the US biological warfare program.

Yet, there were no reports of members of America's extreme right or employees of Defense Department biological weapons facilities being abducted, imprisoned, waterboarded, beaten, shackled in stress positions or subjected to sexual humiliation. Instead, the entire matter was quietly dropped by the administration as it waged a hysterical campaign to terrorize the American people with the supposed threat from Middle East terrorism and Iraq in particular.

While defending the Bush administration's treatment of detainees at Guantánamo and elsewhere, Rice affirmed that the situation had undergone an “evolution,” with Congress having put “in place a set of

laws that were not there in 2002 and 2003.”

She was referring to the 2005 Detainee Treatment Act. Drafted by Senator John McCain in collaboration with the Bush White House, this legislation served largely to cover up and immunize past acts of torture while placing no real impediment to the continuation of these same methods and barring no specific torture technique, including waterboarding. Moreover, the administration has insisted that CIA interrogators are not bound by the terms of this law and must continue using “enhanced interrogation techniques.”

The act’s avowal that the US would not subject those in its clutches to “cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment” was meant for public consumption, aimed at rescuing at least some shred of America’s reputation in the aftermath of the photographic revelations of sadism, abuse and torture at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

“These issues have evolved in the context of our democracy, they’ve evolved in the constant debate about our values and what are values tell us to do,” Rice continued. “We are in a different place now than we were, but I don’t want anyone to believe that even when we were in that most difficult place that we failed to ask the question, ‘Are we living up to our laws and to our treaty obligations?’”

Whatever Rice wants or doesn’t want anyone to believe, the record is by now quite clear. The Bush administration asked the question about the law and obligations under the Geneva Conventions, the Treaty on Torture and other international agreements and concocted the answers it desired. Its legal advisers, including Alberto Gonzales, David Addington and John Yoo, developed the doctrine that as commander-in-chief in a supposed time of war—the undeclared global “war on terror”—Bush was bound by no law and no treaty whatsoever.

Other novel legal theories followed, including the claim that, by designating detainees as “enemy combatants”—an invented category with no legal standing whatsoever—one could deny them rights and protections universally applicable under the Geneva Conventions, and the assertion that physical and mental abuse only rose to the level of torture if it produced effects comparable to death or major organ failure.

This is what the “values” of Bush, Cheney, Rice and Co. told them to do.

Contrary to Rice’s claims, this process continued well past 2002-2003 and after the enactment of the Detainee Treatment Act passed by Congress and remains ongoing. In any case, her argument can be boiled down to: “We never tortured before, and we *really* don’t torture now.”

The Justice Department IG report—relying on the sworn eyewitness testimony of hundreds of FBI agents—establishes in stomach-turning detail that the US did indeed systematically torture those it detained without charges or trials.

Moreover, Rice was one of those directly involved in crafting and directing the methods of physical brutality, mental torture and sexual sadism that were employed over and over again against detainees held by the US in prisons from Guantánamo to Abu Ghraib.

As ABC News reported last month, she chaired a National Security Council Principals Committee—including all the top figures in Bush’s cabinet—which reviewed and approved interrogation techniques.

“The high-level discussions about these ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ were so detailed,” ABC said, citing senior administration officials, “some of these interrogation sessions were almost choreographed—down to the number of times CIA agents could use a specific tactic.” Bush subsequently confirmed the account, saying that he approved of the committee’s work.

In other words, Condoleezza Rice sat around the table with Vice President Cheney, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Powell, CIA Director Tenet, Attorney General Ashcroft and others, discussing and approving methods that included waterboarding, beatings, the prolonged shackling of prisoners in painful positions, use of attack

dogs in interrogation, draping detainees in women’s underwear, forced nudity and other forms of sexual humiliation, sleep and sensory deprivation and holding detainees in isolation for months on end.

Not satisfied with Rice’s answer, her questioner at Thursday’s meeting pressed further, demanding whether she was saying that waterboarding does not constitute torture. “I think I’ve answered your question,” the Secretary of State responded with a tight smile.

The Google executive cut the employee off and started to move to the next questioner before realizing that the British foreign minister was preparing to make his own reply.

Standing firmly in defense of the “special relationship” between London and Washington, Miliband acknowledged that there existed “differences in national law and national practice,” but insisted that these divergences did “not call into question the fundamental nature of our alliance.”

His statements notwithstanding, torture of prisoners is not a matter of “national practice,” but rather a war crime. If the British foreign minister offers such an alibi for these crimes, it is because his own government is complicit, having allowed its citizens to rot in Guantánamo for years, permitting “special rendition” flights to transport US-held detainees from British airports to torture chambers in the Middle East and having itself sought, unsuccessfully, to allow the use of confessions extracted under torture as evidence in criminal prosecutions.

More fundamentally, the British ruling elite has served as the accomplice of Washington’s key criminal act—the waging of a war of aggression to secure the strategic interests of American capitalism in the Middle East. This militarist aggression—directed at offsetting the decline of US economic dominance through the use of armed force—has given rise to a host of other crimes, torture among the most repugnant.

In her remarks in California, Condoleezza Rice spoke wistfully of returning to Stanford University next year as a professor and “reflecting” on her actions over the past eight years.

The only appropriate place for a review of these actions is an international tribunal constituted to try her, Bush, Cheney and other senior officials for the most serious war crimes carried out by a major power since the fall of Hitler’s Third Reich.

This task cannot be entrusted to any section of the existing political establishment. The Democratic Party, the US corporations and the media are all fully implicated in the crimes of the Bush administration, including its use of torture. The defense of democratic rights and the struggle against war, together with holding accountable the war criminals in the White House, depend upon the development of a new independent political movement of the working class.

The unprecedented economic crisis now unfolding in America and on a world scale, combined with the ever-widening gulf between the financial elite and masses of working people, is creating the conditions for a new eruption of class struggle out of which such a mass socialist movement can emerge.



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