

Obama signals continuity with US torture regime

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The election of Democrat Barack Obama as president of the United States was driven in large measure by the disgust of broad sections of the American people with the criminal policies carried out in the name of the Bush administration's "global war on terrorism." These policies found their most odious expression in the torture and detention without charges of thousands of individuals at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, the infamous Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and CIA "black sites" scattered around the world.

One of the pledges that Obama made repeatedly on the campaign trail, something that was supposed to symbolize a break with the past, was that he would close the Guantanamo prison within the first 100 days of his presidency.

Yet, with barely a week to go before he is sworn in as the 44th president of the United States, Obama has even backed off of that pledge, while giving broad indications that his overall national security policy will have far more to do with continuity than with the much promised "change" of his election campaign.

Obama hedged on his Guantanamo pledge in a televised interview Sunday on the ABC News show "This Week." The interview coincided with the seventh anniversary of the opening of the US penal facility, when the first contingent of prisoners—tortured, drugged, manacled and dressed in orange jump suits—was flown from Afghanistan to Cuba.

On Tuesday, the *International Herald Tribune* reported that Obama transition officials had said Monday that Obama would issue an executive order on his first full day in office ordering the closing of the camp, but indicated it would take many months, "perhaps as long as a year," to actually remove the remaining detainees and shut the prison.

At the outset of the ABC News interview Obama was asked about the ongoing massacre of the Palestinian population in Gaza. The program's host, George Stephanopoulos, played a clip of the then-Democratic presidential candidate's statement in Israel during the election campaign, in which he told an Israeli audience, "If somebody was sending rockets into my house where my two daughters sleep at night, I'm going to do everything in my power to stop that. I would expect Israelis to do the same thing." The statement has been cited repeatedly by Israeli officials as a justification of the one-sided slaughter that has killed or wounded some 5,000 Palestinians, the majority of

them civilians.

Asked if he would repeat the same statement today, given the subsequent carnage, Obama answered in the affirmative. "I think that's a basic principle of any country—is that they've got to protect their citizens." He likewise signaled that his Mideast policy would be in continuity with that of the Clinton and Bush administrations, which has played a major role in creating the current catastrophe.

On the question of Iran, he insisted that his administration would pursue a policy of "engagement," but then went on to repeat unsubstantiated claims that the Iranian regime is "exporting terrorism through Hamas, through Hezbollah" and "pursuing a nuclear weapon"—a charge that the most recent US National Intelligence Estimate rejected. The implication was that an Obama administration would go through the diplomatic motions in order to better prepare a new US war of aggression.

Much of the interview centered on a statement made earlier by outgoing Vice President Dick Cheney, a principal architect of the US policies of torture, extraordinary rendition and aggressive war. Cheney cautioned Obama not to "implement your campaign rhetoric," but rather to "find out precisely what it is we did and how we did it," which he said would be vital to "keeping the nation safe and secure."

Asked for his reaction, Obama responded, "I think it's pretty good advice."

He went on to distance himself from Cheney, insisting that waterboarding constituted torture. However, Cheney's own admission that he helped implement the use of waterboarding, making the former vice-president by definition a torturer, did not diminish Obama's tone of deference and cordiality towards Cheney and his advice.

Obama went on to affirm his belief that interrogation techniques must abide by the "rule of law, our Constitution and international standards." However, when asked whether this meant an end to the CIA's "special program" in which "enhanced interrogation techniques", i.e., torture, have been utilized, Obama quickly retreated. He said, "I'm not going to lay out a particular program because, again, I thought that Dick Cheney's advice was good, which is let's make sure we know everything that's being done."

On the proposal to close down Guantanamo, Obama insisted, "It is more difficult than I think a lot of people realize." The

problem, he asserted, was that the hundreds who remain imprisoned there include some who “may be very dangerous who have not been put on trial or have not gone through some adjudication. And some of the evidence against them may be tainted even though it’s true.”

The solution to this problem, he indicated, involves “creating a process.” He added, “Our legal teams are working in consultation with our national security apparatus as we speak to help design exactly what we need to do.”

According to most accounts, what the president-elect is talking about is creating some kind of new “national security court” in which “tainted evidence—including confessions extracted through torture—may be used either to try and convict defendants or to continue detaining them without trial, and in which evidence and proceedings can be kept secret.

Such remedies are being advocated as an alternative to swiftly closing down a facility that is seen all over the world as the hallmark of state criminality and either releasing or bringing to trial before a normal court of law those held there. What Obama is suggesting would enshrine in US law the torture regime developed under the Bush administration and create a pseudo-legal framework for further expanding the police-state apparatus of the US government.

Stephanopoulos then asked Obama to reply to the most popular question posted on the president-elect’s web site, *change.gov*, inquiring whether he would appoint a special prosecutor to “investigate the greatest crimes of the Bush administration, including torture and warrantless wiretapping.”

Obama made it clear that he has no intention of holding accountable those responsible for the political and international crimes carried out over the past eight years.

While affirming the general principle that no one is “above the law,” Obama stressed, “I also have a belief that we need to look forward as opposed to looking backwards.” He likewise voiced his concern that any serious investigation would ignite a furor within the US intelligence apparatus, insisting that he did not want the “extraordinarily talented people” at the CIA to “feel like they’ve got to spend all their time looking over their shoulders and lawyering.”

As recently as last April, during the election campaign, Obama declared that he would ask his attorney general to “immediately review” evidence of crimes by the Bush administration. Yet, in his interview Sunday, he said that his nominee for the post, Eric Holder, would be “making some calls,” but reiterated, “my general belief is that when it comes to national security, what we have to focus on is getting things right in the future, as opposed looking at what we got wrong in the past.”

Even in response to whether a toothless coverup like the 9/11 Commission might be mounted by the new administration, Obama responded, “My orientation’s going to be to move forward.”

Given this commitment to granting what amounts to

immunity to top officials in the Bush administration, including Bush and Cheney, as well as the intelligence apparatus, Obama’s formal renunciation of torture is as hollow and cynical as Bush’s own repeated assertion that, “The United States does not torture.” It did, it does, and it undoubtedly will continue to do so under an Obama administration.

Under the Geneva Conventions, those responsible for torture, including top political officials, must be prosecuted. Obama’s commitment to what amounts to an amnesty on this question makes him complicit.

All the rhetoric about “moving forward” cannot hide the fact that the incoming administration is determined to cover up these crimes because they were supported not merely by the Bush administration and the Republicans, but by the Democrats as well. Any genuine probe of the torture and detention policies of the last several years would inevitably implicate Democratic congressional leaders who were briefed and signed off on these criminal practices.

Obama’s “moderation” and “non-partisan” approach have won praise from the political right and the establishment media.

The latest issue of *Newsweek* magazine carries a cover story headlined: “What Would Dick Do? Why Obama May Soon Find Virtue in Cheney’s Vision of Power.”

“Obama, who has been receiving intelligence briefings for weeks, is unlikely to wildly overcorrect for the Bush administration’s abuses,” the *Newsweek* story states.

The president-elect’s performance on “This Week” elicited a column dripping with cynical satisfaction by William Kristol in the *New York Times*. Kristol, among the most prominent ideologues of the neo-conservative right, titled his piece “Continuity We Can Believe In.”

Kristol began by noting Obama’s announcement that he had narrowed his search for a White House dog to two “no-drama” breeds, adding, “And he seems to be going for the no-dramatic-change-in-the-White-House alternative as well.”

The tongue-in-cheek presentation barely concealed an unflattering analogy. Obama, marketed to the American electorate as the “candidate of change,” is emerging ever more openly as the lap dog of the same ruling elites that pursued their interests through the Bush administration before him.

Inevitably, to serve these economic, social and political interests, an Obama administration will incorporate much of the same criminal methods that were employed by its predecessor. It is for this reason that even the largely symbolic task of shutting down the US prison at Guantanamo has suddenly become very complicated.

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