

Torture and the American ruling class

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On Sunday, the *New York Review of Books* published an article based upon substantial citations from a report by the International Committee of the Red Cross on the treatment of prisoners held by the US Central Intelligence Agency. The still-secret report—from the international organization tasked with monitoring compliance with the Geneva Conventions—concluded that the treatment of detainees "constituted torture" and "cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment."

The conclusions that flow from the Red Cross report are unequivocal: Officials in the US government are guilty of war crimes. The report is *prima facie* evidence—if more evidence were needed—for the immediate arrest and prosecution of top officials of the former Bush administration, including Bush himself. (See "Red Cross: US tortured terror suspects")

The ICRC report is based on interviews with 14 prisoners who were transferred to Guantánamo Bay from the network of CIA-run secret prisons in 2006. Shortly before their transfer, the Bush administration for the first time formally acknowledged the existence of these prisons, where individuals were systematically tortured over a period of several years and held outside of any legal framework.

While the photo images of Abu Ghraib have been burned into the consciousness of the world's population, we have only verbal descriptions of the treatment inflicted on the individuals held by the CIA.

The ICRC report's table of contents amounts to a catalog of torture techniques, all of them employed by US personnel: Continuous Solitary Confinement and Incommunicado Detention, Suffocation by water, Prolonged Stress Standing, Beatings by use of a collar, Beating and kicking, Confinement in a box, Prolonged nudity, Sleep deprivation and use of loud music, Exposure to cold temperature/cold water, Prolonged use of handcuffs and shackles, Threats, Forced shaving, Deprivation/restricted provision of solid food.

Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, an alleged planner of the September 11 attacks, reported to the Red Cross physical beatings and other forms of torture. At one secret location—which Mohammed said he thought was in Poland—he was interrogated by CIA officials who informed him that they had received the "green light from Washington" to give him "a hard time."

"I was never threatened with death," he said. "In fact I was told that they would not allow me to die, but that I would be brought to the '*verge of death and back again*'" (italics in original). Mohammed, whose treatment was typical, was subject to waterboarding on five occasions and was shackled in a standing position for up to a month at a time.

These actions were authorized at the highest levels of the Bush administration. When the CIA captured one of the first prisoners, Abu Zubaydah, in 2002, his detention and interrogation were closely supervised by Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, and Attorney General John Ashcroft. Zubaydah's detention was seen as an opportunity to experiment with "enhanced interrogation techniques."

The Justice Department was tasked with creating a pseudo-legal rationale for the torture, and top lawyers for the White House participated in the drafting of memoranda picking apart the definition of torture to allow for virtually anything. The US did not have to follow the Geneva Conventions, they argued. The president, as commander-in-chief, had the constitutional authority to order torture and violate all manner of constitutional rights. The use of torture became in some ways a model for the construction of a legal theory of presidential dictatorship.

Those who ordered this policy were well aware that they were engaged in criminal activity. In December 2007, the Bush administration was forced to acknowledge that the CIA had destroyed videotaped

interrogation of two prisoners—Abu Zubaydah and Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri. This month, however, the CIA admitted that the number of tapes destroyed was much higher—92 interrogation videos in all. The CIA's destruction of these tapes contravened explicit judicial orders.

In 2006, the Bush administration, with the complicity of the Democratic Party, passed the Military Commissions Act, authorizing police-state tribunals for the tortured prisoners and modifying the War Crimes Act to protect the torturers.

Outside the CIA gulag, torture was carried out in the prisons of Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in Guantánamo Bay. In the United States, the government imprisoned US citizen Jose Padilla in a US military brig, subjecting him to three-and-a-half years of near solitary confinement and abuse, including sleep deprivation, extreme temperatures, and prolonged shackling.

None of those who carried out these illegal and unconstitutional actions have been prosecuted. According to recent reports, a probe into the destruction of the video evidence of CIA torture is unlikely to result in any prosecutions—only the latest in a long series of cover-ups and whitewashes.

From the beginning, the Democratic Party has played the role of accomplice. Leading Democratic Party officials were informed of the torture program as well as the destruction of evidence. Along with the mass media, the Democratic Party has worked systematically to ignore revelations of the crimes, or, when this has not been possible, to bury them quickly. Everything has been done to keep the American people in the dark about what exactly has taken place. This cover-up continues today. The revelations regarding the ICRC report have once again received scant attention in the media.

Far from bringing those responsible to account, the Obama administration has pledged to "look forward" rather than rehash old controversies. It has backed immunity for those who penned the torture memos and has taken up the "state secrets" argument to quash lawsuits into the use of extraordinary rendition and domestic spying.

The essential elements of policy are preserved. Most recently, Obama decided to cease using the term "enemy combatant," while maintaining the ability of

the government to hold prisoners in the "war on terror" indefinitely, without charge. The *Wall Street Journal* notes approvingly in an editorial on Wednesday that Obama "lambasts his predecessor, then makes cosmetic changes that leave the substance of Bush policy intact." Among the policies preserved, the *Journal* cites "interrogation, surveillance, rendition, state secrets, now detention."

The continuity of the policy and the complete lack of any accountability demonstrate that what is involved is not simply the actions of one individual or one administration, but tendencies deeply rooted in the decay of American capitalism.

The erosion of fundamental democratic rights has closely paralleled the extreme growth of inequality and the explosion of militarist violence. As he continues Bush's policies on detention and torture, Obama has also continued the multi-trillion-dollar handouts to the banks and the prosecution of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. The anti-democratic measures of the US government will ultimately be directed at any opposition that emerges to these policies of the financial elite.

The resort to the most blatantly criminal and barbaric practices is symptomatic of a ruling class that has completely outlived itself, a dead weight upon the future development of mankind.

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