

Bush, top cabinet officials monitored torture of detainees

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Former President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell and other top Bush administration officials had detailed knowledge of the Central Intelligence Agency's torture tactics and approved them, according to a front-page article published Wednesday by the *New York Times*.

Also on Wednesday, the Senate Armed Services Committee released the results of its investigation into the treatment of alleged terrorists in military prisons. Among its major findings, the 231-page report confirms that CIA torture began months before the drafting of the recently released Bush Justice Department legal memos that sanctioned it.

This confirmed that the memos were nothing more than pseudo-legal rationalizations for illegal policies that were already being carried out. They were concocted in order to provide an ex post facto legal cover for CIA torturers and the government officials, from Bush on down, who gave the orders for their actions.

The same report provides evidence that the White House ordered the torturing of alleged terrorists in an attempt to extract statements linking Al Qaeda with then-Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. This fact establishes a direct connection between the violation of domestic and international laws barring torture, the preparation of an unprovoked war of aggression against Iraq, and a conspiracy by the president and his top officials to deceive the American people and drag them into war on the basis of lies. It underscores that the adoption of torture as a tool of foreign policy is part and parcel of a turn to dictatorial forms of rule and the assault on the democratic rights of the American people.

These latest revelations further demonstrate that the Bush White House was the headquarters of a militarist clique that operated with contempt for the Constitution and the law. These are the very officials whom the Obama administration is seeking to shield from criminal investigation and prosecution.

The *Times* article and the Senate report signal a sharpening of the conflict within the state and the Obama administration itself over the torture policies carried out by both the CIA and the military under Bush. That conflict erupted into the open following Obama's decision last Thursday to release four previously classified memos from the Bush Justice Department detailing various abusive interrogation tactics and vouching for their legality.

The new disclosures have made President Obama's position untenable. He has repeatedly signaled that no high-ranking Bush administration officials and none of the CIA perpetrators are to be investigated. On Tuesday, he left open the possibility of a criminal investigation of the Bush Justice Department lawyers who drafted the

torture memos and suggested that he might support a "bipartisan" and "non-political" commission of inquiry into the treatment of detainees, along the lines of the 9/11 Commission that oversaw an official cover-up of the events surrounding the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

The Senate report confirms that torture, including waterboarding, was already underway well before the first Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) "torture memo" was signed by then Assistant Attorney General for the OLC, Jay Bybee. This undermines Obama and Attorney General Eric Holder's argument that the CIA agents should not be investigated because they were following guidelines set down by the Justice Department.

The Obama administration has not even attempted to invent a legal pretext for not investigating the authors of the torture program, something it is obliged to do under international law. It has merely mouthed banalities about the need to "move forward" and "turn the page."

Wednesday's *Times* article, which is based on "more than two dozen interviews with current and former senior officials of the CIA, White House, Justice Department and Congress," reveals that the top Bush administration officials, including the president himself, were closely involved in approving torture methods.

The discussions took place after the March 28, 2002 capture of alleged Al Qaeda member Abu Zubaydah in "a series of small-group and individual briefings" attended by Bush, Cheney, Rice, Powell, Rumsfeld, and Attorney General John Ashcroft.

The article reports that CIA Director George Tenet addressed the meetings. The top Bush administration officials all personally approved the methods, or made no objections to their use. Bush gave his approval, and Cheney "strongly endorsed" the program, according to the *Times*.

The meetings discussed the torture methods in minute detail. "Tenet's descriptions of each proposed interrogation method was so clinical and specific that at one briefing Mr. Ashcroft objected, saying that cabinet officials should approve broad outlines of important policies, not the fine details, according to someone present," the article notes.

Later Ashcroft intimated that he felt the purpose of Tenet's meticulous descriptions was to provide future legal cover in the event the methods came to light. Indeed, Rice demanded that Ashcroft personally give his assurance that the torture methods under review did not violate domestic or international law, which he did.

The *Times* article also makes clear that top congressional leaders were briefed on the torture methods. The article notes that in 2002 the methods were disclosed to "the so-called Gang of Four — the top

Republican and Democrat on the Senate and House [intelligence] committees” in “multiple briefings.”

Among the four was Democrat Nancy Pelosi of California, currently the Speaker of the House. Pelosi claims that while she was briefed on the “enhanced interrogation” methods, including waterboarding, the CIA told her the methods would not be used. The committee’s chair, Democratic Senator Bob Graham of Florida, said he has no recollection of any briefing on the methods.

Republican Porter Goss of Florida, who would later lead the CIA, had a better recollection of the meetings. “We were briefed, and we certainly understood what CIA was doing,” Goss said. “Not only was there no objection, there was actually concern about whether the agency was doing enough.”

The US Senate Armed Services Committee’s investigation began in November of 2008 and is based on over 70 interviews and 200,000 pages of documents, both classified and unclassified.

A member of an Army medical unit deployed to Guantánamo Bay in 2002 told the committee that the purpose of their interrogations was to establish a link between Al Qaeda and Iraq. The report quotes him as saying: “a large part of the time we were focused on trying to establish a link between Al Qaeda and Iraq and we were not being successful in establishing a link between Al Qaeda and Iraq. The more frustrated people got in not being able to establish this link ... there was more and more pressure to resort to measures that might produce more immediate results.”

A former military intelligence official familiar with the investigation substantiated this, telling *McClatchy Newspapers*, “For most of 2002 and into 2003, Cheney and Rumsfeld, especially, were also demanding proof of the links between al Qaeda and Iraq that (former Iraqi exile leader Ahmed) Chalabi and others had told them were there.”

The committee’s report further substantiates earlier evidence directly linking Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to torture at Abu Ghraib in Iraq. In December of 2002, Rumsfeld personally approved 15 “harsh interrogation” methods for inmates at the Guantánamo prison camp. The methods were based on advice from military planners at Guantánamo and the Pentagon, and included such methods as food deprivation, stress positions, forced nudity, exposure to extreme heat and cold, and slamming prisoner into walls.

After objections were raised by military lawyers, it was determined that not all of these forms of torture could be used in Guantánamo. However, Rumsfeld’s memo was used, verbatim, to devise methods for such notorious US military prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan as Abu Ghraib and Bagram, the report reveals.

The media and politicians have remained silent over torture’s human toll. An unknown number of Iraqis and Afghans have died in US military prisons, some of these as a direct result of torture. Over 40 Guantánamo prisoners have attempted to commit suicide over the years, resulting in at least three deaths.

Obama is being buffeted by bitter conflict within the state, which has in recent days seen open Republican attacks on his administration by Bush CIA director Michael Hayden and former Vice President Dick Cheney. Both have categorically defended the torture methods and charged that by releasing the memos and acknowledging the torture employed under Bush, the new administration is jeopardizing national security and strengthening the terrorists.

In the face of open opposition from powerful sections of the military and intelligence apparatus on the one hand, and criticism from human rights and civil liberties organizations on the other, Obama has sought

to appease the former while offering gestures of “change” to the latter.

A typical example of the attacks from the right was the lead editorial in Wednesday’s *Wall Street Journal*, which argued that what the torture memos “mainly show is the lengths to which the Justice Department went not to cross the line into torture.” It also warned that the exposure of overt criminality in the CIA would imperil the nation. “The risk-averse CIA that so grievously failed in the run-up to 9/11 was a product of a spy culture that still remembered the Church Committee of the 1970s and the Iran-Contra recriminations of the 1980s,” it claimed.

As for the Democratic Party and the liberal wing of the ruling elite, it has largely repeated Obama’s pleas to “move on” and not seek “retribution.” No prominent Democrat has called for the investigation of Bush, Cheney and other top Bush administration officials, and not a few liberal commentators have echoed the concerns of the *Wall Street Journal*.

In a particularly filthy column, David Ignatius, columnist for the *Washington Post*, warned that the CIA would “roll over” and cease protecting the US from terrorist attack. “The lesson for younger officers is obvious,” he writes, “Keep your head down. Duck the assignments that carry political risk. Stay away from a counterterrorism program that has become a career hazard.”

Ignatius then cited “the chilling effects of past CIA scandals,” lamenting that exposure of CIA connections to “Guatemalan death squads” had cost the agency “sources who had provided truly valuable intelligence.” Ignatius closes his column by calling for “a commission that can review secret evidence behind closed doors, then report to the nation.” This is the formula for a whitewash.

The conflict reaches well into the Obama administration itself. In a private memo last week, intelligence director Dennis Blair told his staff that “high value information came from interrogations in which those methods were used.” This justification of torture, from a high-ranking Obama cabinet member, is in line with statements of Cheney and Hayden.

The latest revelations add to a wealth of prima facie evidence for initiating of a criminal investigation of war crimes committed by Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell, Rice, Ashcroft and other top Bush administration officials.

Such an accounting is absolutely critical to exposing and defeating the massive and ongoing assault on democratic rights. However, this can only come about as the product of the mass independent political movement of the working class in opposition to the Obama administration, the two parties of the American ruling elite, and the capitalist system that offers only growing unemployment, poverty, oppression and war.



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