

Right wing threatens Obama over torture charges

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Wednesday's lead editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* threatens President Obama with all-out opposition to any effort to hold Bush administration officials responsible for authorizing torture by the CIA and military. Denouncing Obama's half-hearted criticism of the Bush administration's torture policy as "Presidential Poison," the leading right-wing voice of the American financial aristocracy warns, "His invitation to indict Bush officials will haunt Obama's Presidency."

The commentary reveals the increasingly bitter character of the political crisis that has erupted in ruling circles in the wake of last week's release of classified Bush administration memos that declared torture techniques such as waterboarding to be legal and prescribed the exact methods to be used in interrogating "high-value" prisoners at secret CIA-run prisons.

The editorial was written in response to Obama's comments on Tuesday, when he seemed to reverse the position taken by White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel on a Sunday talk show, denying that any Bush administration officials would face prosecution for authorizing torture. Obama suggested that his administration was open to the possibility that at least the Justice Department attorneys who drafted the torture memos might be subject to sanctions.

The *Journal* declares: "Mark down the date. Tuesday, April 21, 2009, is the moment that any chance of a new era of bipartisan respect in Washington ended. By inviting the prosecution of Bush officials for their antiterror legal advice, President Obama has injected a poison into our politics that he and the country will live to regret."

What is "poison" in the eyes of the *Journal* is any

attempt to hold the previous administration accountable for its crimes. The newspaper argues, "at least until now, the U.S. political system has avoided the spectacle of a new Administration prosecuting its predecessor for policy disagreements. This is what happens in Argentina, Malaysia or Peru, countries where the law is treated merely as an extension of political power."

The reference to "policy disagreements" is a political canard. At issue are not questions of political judgment, policy preference or legal interpretation, but barbarous crimes against humanity, actions universally condemned around the world—torture, abduction and "disappearance" of prisoners, incarceration in secret prisons, outright murder.

This complaint about "criminalizing political differences" is particularly ironic given the role that the *Journal* played, throughout the Clinton administration, in promoting one bogus criminal investigation after another to subvert the White House. The newspaper's editorial page went so far as to suggest that the Democratic president was linked to drug trafficking, rape and even the "murder" of White House aide Vincent Foster.

The reference to Argentina and Peru is remarkable and revealing. The *Journal* editors have said perhaps more than they intended. They effectively identify such figures as Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld with dictators whose trial and punishment was considered an essential step in the democratization of their countries after decades of US-backed military rule.

In both these countries, high-ranking officials, including former Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori, his former intelligence chief Vladimiro Montesinos, and several retired generals and admirals who played leading roles in

Argentine military juntas, faced prosecution for crimes including torture and murder.

The crimes of the junta leaders in Argentina include the “disappearance” of thousands of leftist students and workers, many of them tortured under interrogation, then put into helicopters and flown out over the Atlantic Ocean, where they were murdered by being thrown into the sea, and their fate long concealed from the world.

Fujimori of Peru, the chief executive put on trial most recently, was convicted April 7, after a nationally televised trial, on charges of creating a death squad that killed 25 people, including an eight-year-old boy, in two massacres in the working class suburbs of Lima. These were among the thousands of victims of military-police repression during Fujimori’s ten years in power (1990-2000).

The *Journal* exploits the contradiction in Obama’s position—reflecting his fear of opposition from within the CIA and the Pentagon—in exonerating the CIA torturers while suggesting that the civilian legal advisers could face charges. Why prosecute the lawyers and not the senior Bush administration officials who demanded the legal green light for torture, the editorial asks: “Is this President going to put his predecessor in the dock too?”

The *Journal* makes this challenge because it knows full well that Obama has no intention of placing any high-ranking Bush administration official on trial. Even before the editorial was published, on Wednesday evening, Obama met with House and Senate Democratic leaders at the White House to declare his opposition to a special congressional inquiry into the torture interrogations.

According to a report on the *New York Times* web site Thursday, “The Senate majority leader, Harry Reid of Nevada, and other top Senate Democrats endorsed Mr. Obama’s view on Thursday, telling reporters that they preferred to wait for the results of an investigation by the Senate intelligence committee expected sometime ‘late this year.’”

“Retribution should not be a part of what we’re talking about,” Reid said, emphasizing that the intelligence committee would “make a public report,” rather than taking any action. In other words, stall and let the political storm pass, then bury the issue.

The *Journal* presses its attack by warning that, in the event of an investigation into torture, prominent Democrats would be implicated, like House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who was the senior Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee in 2002, fully briefed on the torture and enthusiastically in support of it. That is another reason why the Obama administration will take no serious action against either the torturers or those who gave them their orders.

The *Journal* speaks for substantial sections of the military-intelligence apparatus, the Republican Party and the financial elite, who are contemptuous of democratic rights and of Obama’s efforts to posture as the new face of American imperialism after the debacle of the Bush years. The essence of their argument is that, in the name of national security, everything is permitted.

The conclusion of the *Journal* editorial is especially ominous: “By indulging his party’s desire to criminalize policy advice, he has unleashed furies that will haunt his Presidency.” Given the source—a newspaper owned by billionaire reactionary Rupert Murdoch, closely linked to the highest circles of the financial oligarchy and the military-intelligence apparatus—this language must be understood as a threat to the political and even the physical survival of the Obama administration.

In the cases of Argentina and Peru to which the *Journal* editorial referred, the attempts to bring prominent officials to justice for crimes against humanity sparked threats of military coups. The question for Mr. Murdoch is: what does he know of similar sentiments among high-ranking US military and intelligence operatives?

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