

Torture and Washington's policy of aggressive war

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Divisions are emerging within the US ruling class amid the deepening crisis over the use of torture by the Bush administration.

The Obama administration itself was internally split over the decision to release four previously classified Bush Justice Department memos detailing and approving abusive interrogation methods, including waterboarding. Obama overruled his CIA director, Leon Panetta, and released the memos on April 16, at the same time announcing that there would be no criminal investigation or prosecution of CIA officers involved in the torture of detainees.

Obama did so under the pressure of a court-imposed deadline to release the memos. He evidently hoped that by releasing the memos while ruling out any criminal investigation he could placate his liberal supporters and world opinion, giving the appearance of “change” from the policies of the Bush administration, while reassuring the CIA, the military and former Bush officials that they would suffer no consequences for their illegal actions.

However, the release of the torture memos only intensified the controversy and sharpened divisions within the state. Bush CIA Director Michael Hayden and former Vice President Dick Cheney made open appeals to disaffected elements within the national security apparatus by defending the brutal interrogation methods and denouncing the release of the memos as harmful to US national security. In evident disarray, Obama officials first declared that there would be no investigations of either the Justice Department lawyers who drafted the memos or high-level Bush administration officials who solicited them.

Then Obama appeared to retreat from this position, suggesting that Attorney General Eric Holder could decide to initiate criminal probes of the lawyers and that Congress might impanel a “bipartisan and non-political” inquiry, along the lines of the 9/11 Commission that whitewashed the government’s role in the events surrounding the terrorist attacks of September 2001. This evoked angry denunciations and threats of political retaliation from the *Wall Street Journal* editorial board and other organs of the Republican right, whereupon Obama shifted once again, calling Democratic congressional leaders to the White House to make it clear he opposed even a 9/11-type commission.

Now, he appears to have settled on a policy of backing an investigation that is being undertaken by the Senate Intelligence Committee. In a column published in Saturday’s *Wall Street Journal*, the Democratic chair of the committee, California Senator

Dianne Feinstein, argued that any investigation into Bush administration torture should be limited to that of her committee. She made clear that the Senate panel’s investigation represented no threat to any section of the national security apparatus or any Bush administration official.

The proceedings will be done “in a classified environment,” she wrote, “and the results will be brought to the full committee for its careful consideration. The committee will make a determination with respect to findings and recommendations.” In other words, it is unlikely that the results of the investigation will be made public.

She went on stress that the inquiry would be conducted “behind closed doors” and that it would not be a “show trial” or “witch hunt.” As proof of the committee’s reliability, she cited its 2004 investigation into pre-war claims of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction—an investigation that produced a cover-up of the Bush administration’s lies.

This has not satisfied elements of the US national security establishment and the Republican Party. They are fighting back, exploiting the fact that the Democrats are deeply compromised by their own support for torture.

Ex-CIA chief Porter Goss denounced calls for an investigation in an April 25 *Washington Post* column titled “Security before Politics.” He wrote that Republicans and Democrats in Congress “were briefed that the CIA was holding and interrogating high-value terrorists. We understood what the CIA was doing. We gave the CIA our bipartisan support. We gave the CIA funding to carry out its activities... I do not recall a single objection from my colleagues.”

Among those informed of such crimes were the Democratic speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, and other top congressional Democrats.

The result is the spectacle of a US political establishment—where the White House and both houses of Congress are controlled by the Democratic Party—that is incapable of enforcing its own laws, despite ample public evidence of violations that were sanctioned by the highest levels of the state.

The use of torture is itself inseparable from the central criminal act that was sanctioned by the entire US political establishment—the launching of illegal and aggressive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This decision had far-reaching and tragic consequences, of which torture was only one. These wars of aggression caused the death, maiming and displacement of millions in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the death and physical

and mental scarring of thousands of American soldiers.

Far from being an accidental or excessive byproduct, torture was an essential component in creating the web of lies and disinformation that allowed these wars to proceed. *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich made a correct point in a commentary published on Sunday, noting that a major factor in the 2002 decision to torture captured Al Qaeda operative Abu Zubaydah was the Bush administration's need to manufacture false evidence of links between Al Qaeda and Iraq.

Rich noted that the Bush administration had a "ticking timetable for selling a war in Iraq." He cited a Senate Armed Services Committee report released last week in which army psychiatrist Maj. Paul Burney, who was overseeing interrogations at Guantánamo Bay, said, "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." Burney said high-level officials were "frustrated" at this situation, and interrogators felt "more and more pressure to resort to measures" that would produce the desired evidence.

As in the times of the Spanish Inquisition and of Stalin's henchmen, the purpose of this torture was to force victims to produce politically useful lies. In this case, Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld wanted to claim that there was a risk that Iraq might give weapons of mass destruction to Al Qaeda, so as to justify their illegal invasion of Iraq.

For a Bush administration desperate for a justification to invade oil-rich Iraq, this made torture a political necessity. According to a recent *Vanity Fair* article, Zubaydah claimed under torture that bin Laden was collaborating with Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein to destabilize the autonomous Kurdish regions in northern Iraq. This claim became a commonplace of apologists for the Iraq war, appearing notably in the columns of pro-war *New York Times* columnist William Safire.

This use of torture was part of a broader pattern, arising from the US ruling class' response to the September 11 attacks. It ruled out any serious investigation of the attacks—including the suspicious blocking of FBI investigations of the hijackers by high-level officials prior to the attacks, and the close business links between the bin Ladens and high-ranking US political figures such as then-President George W. Bush. Instead, it seized upon the attacks as a pretext to carpet-bomb and occupy Afghanistan.

The hysterical atmosphere whipped up by the US press and government to justify this aggression against Afghanistan created the context both for US war crimes in Afghanistan—such as the massacre of Taliban prisoners of war at the Qala-i-Janghi fortress and, under US supervision, by the troops of Afghan warlord Rashid Dostum—and for the use of torture. In February 2002, President Bush announced that the US would no longer comply with the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of prisoners. Detainees captured by the US in Afghanistan were transported to a prison camp at Guantánamo Bay, where they were tortured and denied access to US courts.

The Bush administration made full use of the lies it had extracted through torture. Besides Zubaydah's linking of Al Qaeda to Iraq, both he and Binyam Mohamed stated under torture that US citizen José Padilla was planning a "dirty bomb" attack on US cities.

The US government later dropped this claim, in a tacit admission that it was false, but it had already served its purpose. The Bush administration waited a month after capturing Padilla to announce his alleged "dirty bomb" plot to the public, then used it to drown out a mounting controversy four days after FBI agent Coleen Rowley revealed that her investigations of 9/11 hijackers had been squelched by FBI superiors.

The invasion of Iraq, justified to the American public through the use of torture, encouraged Washington to expand the use of torture against the Iraqi people so as to obtain information on the Iraqi resistance. Guantánamo Bay prison commander General Geoffrey Miller was sent to Iraq to "Gitmoize" Iraq—i.e., to transfer the interrogation methods of Guantánamo Bay to Iraqi prisons. The result was the Abu Ghraib scandal, as pictures surfaced in 2004 showing large-scale US torture of Iraqi prisoners.

The close link between torture and US wars of aggression again confirms the contention of the International Military Tribunal set up to prosecute the Nazi leadership at Nuremberg: "To initiate a war of aggression... is not only an international crime, it is the supreme international crime, differing from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole."

The *World Socialist Web Site* places no confidence in the Democratic Party or the Obama administration to investigate the use of torture by the Bush administration. Even if it is not shut down, any investigation led by such forces will be deeply compromised by political considerations, such as the Democratic Party's complicity in Bush's torture program and the need to justify Obama's continuation of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. A true accounting can come only from a political movement of the working class which holds the entire political establishment responsible for the crimes committed by the Bush administration.

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