

Obama bows to Republican right and military on torture photos

Bill Van Auken
14 May 2009

The Obama administration's decision Wednesday to renege on its promise to comply with a court order and release photographs of US personnel torturing detainees in Iraq and Afghanistan represents another capitulation by his administration to mounting pressure from the right and the military-intelligence apparatus.

Speaking briefly to reporters Wednesday afternoon, Obama said that the photographs would "further inflame anti-American opinion and put our troops in greater danger."

He claimed that the images are "not particularly sensational" and "would not add any additional benefit to our understanding of what was carried out in the past by a small number of individuals." Obama failed to explain what makes the US president the arbiter of what is of "benefit to our understanding."

The Pentagon, with Obama's declared support, announced last month that it would release a "substantial number" of photos of US personnel abusing detainees at several prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan. The decision was taken in compliance with a decision last September by a three-judge panel of the US Court of Appeals upholding a lower court victory for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which had sought the photographs in a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit. The full appeals court refused to rehear the case.

The photographs, reportedly 44 in all, were set to have been released May 28.

The Bush administration had argued that the release of the photos would generate international outrage and violate the rights of the detainees under the Geneva Conventions, rights that the administration had explicitly claimed had no application to detainees, who were classified as "enemy combatants."

Apparently, the Obama administration is preparing to repackage the arguments made under George W. Bush, claiming that the release of the photos would threaten national security and, as the president asserted unconvincingly Wednesday, would have a "chilling effect

on future investigations of detainee abuse."

In making its "national security" case for suppressing the photographs, the Obama administration would likely be compelled to go to the US Supreme Court.

Amplifying on Obama's statements, an administration spokesman told the media, "The president would be the last to excuse the actions depicted in these photos. That is why the Department of Defense investigated these cases and why individuals have been punished through prison sentences, discharges, and a range of other punitive measures."

Nothing could more clearly sum up the criminal character of the Obama administration's decision to prevent the release of these photos. Those subjected to "punitive measures" have consisted of a handful of junior enlisted men, such as those individuals punished in connection with the photographs uncovered in 2004 depicting the horrific treatment of detainees held at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

The entire point of exposing the photographs of similar abuse from a half dozen other prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan was that they prove that the torture of detainees was not the work of a few "bad apples" or psychopaths in uniform, but was systemic. The photographs showing prisoners at Abu Ghraib being beaten, threatened with attack dogs, piled naked in pyramids, smeared with feces, hanging from shackles and dragged on leashes did not represent an aberration. Rather these odious practices and worse were carried out on orders that came from the White House to the Pentagon and down the military chain of command.

The ACLU's Executive Director Anthony D. Romero denounced the about-face by the White House. "The Obama administration's adoption of the stonewalling tactics and opaque policies of the Bush administration flies in the face of the president's stated desire to restore the rule of law, to revive our moral standing in the world and to lead a transparent government," he said in a statement Wednesday. "This decision is particularly disturbing given the Justice Department's failure to initiate a criminal investigation of torture crimes under the Bush administration.

Romero continued, "It is true that these photos would be

disturbing; the day we are no longer disturbed by such repugnant acts would be a sad one. In America, every fact and document gets known—whether now or years from now. And when these photos do see the light of day, the outrage will focus not only on the commission of torture by the Bush administration but on the Obama administration's complicity in covering them up. Any outrage related to these photos should be due not to their release but to the very crimes depicted in them. Only by looking squarely in the mirror, acknowledging the crimes of the past and achieving accountability can we move forward and ensure that these atrocities are not repeated."

Jameel Jaffar, who argued the case for the ACLU called the decision "inconsistent with the promise of transparency that President Obama has repeated so many times."

What is to account for the Obama administration's sudden reversal?

The *New York Times* cited administration officials arguing that the photographs should be suppressed because "the missions in both Iraq and Afghanistan were entering risky, new phases. In Iraq, American combat forces are withdrawing from urban areas and are reducing their numbers nationwide. In Afghanistan, more than 20,000 new troops are flowing in to combat an insurgency that has grown in potency."

Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell said Wednesday that Generals Raymond Odierno, the US commander in Iraq, David McKiernan, the recently sacked commander in Afghanistan, and David Petraeus, the chief of US Central Command, which oversees both wars, "have all voiced real concern about this." He added, "Particularly in Afghanistan, this is the last thing they need."

Defense Secretary Robert Gates, appearing before the House Armed Services Committee Wednesday, said that the generals had "expressed very serious reservations about this and their very, very great worry that release of the photographs will cost American lives. That was all it took for me."

Obama informed Odierno of his decision at a White House meeting Tuesday, before announcing it to the public.

Thus, Obama bowed to the demands of Gates, Petraeus, Odierno and McKiernan, all of whom were placed in their present positions by the same Bush administration that instituted torture as a standard operation procedure for the military and the CIA.

Even more importantly, Obama's U-turn on the question of the torture photos has been carried out in the face of a concerted campaign led by former Vice President Dick Cheney to defend torture and portray the new administration's decision to repudiate "enhanced interrogation techniques" and to release Justice Department

memos justifying torture methods as paving the way for new terrorist attacks.

This has been accompanied by an attempt to justify the crimes of the Bush administration in relation to torture by emphasizing the complicity of key Democrats, particularly House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who were briefed on the use of waterboarding and other acts of torture being carried out against detainees and voiced no objection.

This effort has apparently been spearheaded by the CIA itself, which leaked documents detailing the number of briefings provided to members of Congress on the ongoing torture of detainees beginning in 2002.

There is no doubt that Obama is retreating in the face of this offensive by the Republican right and the national security complex. More fundamentally, however, the administration has made it clear from the outset that it has no interest in seeing any serious investigation of the torture carried out under the Bush administration, much less in the prosecution of those who ordered these practices, from Bush, Cheney, Condoleezza Rice and other cabinet members on down.

Its aim is to preserve intact the police-state infrastructure erected by the Bush administration in its "global war on terror," while continuing to wage the wars of aggression that the previous government began in Afghanistan and Iraq.

This policy of political cowardice and complicity has inevitably turned Obama himself into a defender of torture, using the same "national security" arguments as the Bush administration to cover up its crimes.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact