

Cheney defends torture policy and CIA torturers

Patrick Martin
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In an interview broadcast Sunday, former vice president Dick Cheney defended the brutal interrogations carried out at CIA secret prisons under the direction of the Bush administration and denounced the proposed investigation of a handful of CIA agents for some of the most flagrant acts of torture.

The interview itself was a demonstration of journalistic sycophancy, as Fox News interviewer Chris Wallace avoided using the word “torture” at any point in his questioning of Cheney. The 25-minute discussion focused largely on last week’s release of a heavily censored report by the CIA inspector general, drafted in 2004, which detailed acts that clearly violate the International Convention Against Torture, ratified by the US government a quarter-century ago.

Besides waterboarding, which was illegal under US law even before the international ban, the documented acts of torture include threats of death and mutilation, reinforced by firearms and an electric drill, mock executions, threats to kill or sexually assault female relatives and children, and numerous forms of physical abuse—beating, slapping, trussing prisoners in agonizing positions, and prolonged exposure to the cold. Many of the worst methods employed against prisoners, leading to an undisclosed number of deaths, were blacked out in the documents released last week.

Cheney defended all these methods, which he invariably described, without any challenge from Wallace, as “enhanced interrogation techniques,” or EIT. He repeatedly praised the value of EIT, declaring it essential to the national security policies of the US government.

Under other circumstances, the interview on Fox News would be Exhibit A in a war crimes trial against the former vice president, as Cheney admitted sharing responsibility for the torture regime established in the CIA prisons. He declared he was “proud of” the torture of such prisoners as Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the alleged organizer of the 9/11 attacks, who was waterboarded 183 times. “I knew about the waterboarding,” he said. “Not specifically in any one

particular case, but as a general policy that we had approved.”

Cheney even declared, in one particularly chilling remark, that he fully supported those torturers who went beyond their instructions and engaged in interrogation methods that even the Bush White House had refused to pronounce legal. The exchange went as follows, as Cheney summed up his attitude to the CIA interrogations:

CHENEY: It was good policy. It was properly carried out. It worked very, very well.

WALLACE: So even these cases where they went beyond the specific legal authorization, you’re OK with it?

CHENEY: I am.

Attorney General Eric Holder announced Monday the appointment of a special counsel for the Department of Justice to probe only those cases where the CIA agents went beyond the Bush administration torture guidelines. His action dovetails with the declaration made by President Obama in April that intelligence agents who conducted interrogations within the guidelines should not face investigation or prosecution.

This probe is a whitewash on at least two levels. Agents who conducted waterboarding and other torture methods approved by Bush and Cheney will go scot free. More importantly, the top policymakers who ordered the torture, as well as the Justice Department lawyers who drafted the guidelines, will not face any criminal sanctions.

Even the extremely limited probe initiated by Holder has touched off ferocious opposition within the military-intelligence apparatus as well as from most Republican and many Democratic politicians. Cheney is only the most open and most vociferous defender of the torturers.

He repeated at least five times in the course of the Fox interview that President Obama had promised that no agents would be prosecuted and that Holder’s decision amounted to Obama renegeing on that promise.

Obama’s initial declaration was the product of a ferocious campaign by the intelligence apparatus and former Bush

administration officials who portrayed any prosecution of torturers as an invitation for further terrorist attacks on the American people. Cheney took the extraordinary step of making a public speech before a Washington think tank, denouncing the new administration's policies on Guantanamo and interrogation, barely three months after Obama took office.

While Holder's investigation is only a token gesture, Cheney & Co. are clearly concerned that once begun, the special counsel's probe could go beyond the narrow limits set by the attorney general.

Wallace acknowledged this concern in the interview, asking Cheney, "Do you think it will become an investigation into the Bush lawyers who authorized the activity, into the top policymakers who were involved in the... enhanced interrogation program?"

Cheney replied, "I just think it's an outrageous political act that will do great damage long-term to our capacity to be able to have people take on difficult jobs, make difficult decisions, without having to worry about what the next administration is going to say."

Both Democratic and Republican senators discussed the torture issue on the Sunday television talk shows, with most criticizing Holder for authorizing a preliminary investigation of certain CIA torturers. Democrat Dianne Feinstein, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, voiced opposition to Holder's decision. "I think the timing of this is not very good. The intelligence committee has under way now a total look at the interrogation and detention techniques used for all of the high-value detainees," she said on the CBS program "Face the Nation." She added, "I wish the attorney general had waited."

Republican Senator John McCain claimed to oppose waterboarding and other torture methods, but said that he opposed even Holder's restricted investigation as a threat to the "morale and effectiveness" of the CIA. The main problem with CIA torture, as far as official Washington is concerned, is that it has become public and "harmed our image in the world," as McCain put it in his remarks Sunday.

Most congressional Republicans have adopted a posture of intransigent defense of the torturers, echoing Cheney. Typical was Senator Christopher Bond of Missouri, the ranking Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee, who called the appointment of a special prosecutor a "witch-hunt targeting the terror fighters who have kept us safe since 9/11."

The former vice president spent much of his Fox News interview reiterating this claim—that the use of torture against CIA prisoners was critical in defending the American people from further terrorist attacks after 9/11.

"Those interrogations were involved in the arrest of nearly all the Al Qaeda members that we were able to bring to justice," Cheney claimed, "I think they were directly responsible for the fact that for eight years, we had no further mass casualty attacks against the United States."

He repeated later, "I think the evidence is overwhelming that the EITs were crucial in getting them to cooperate, and that the information they provided did in fact save thousands of lives and let us defeat all further attacks against the United States. The thing I keep coming back to time and time again, Chris, is the fact that we've gone for eight years without another attack. Now, how do you explain that?"

Wallace had no response, but there is an obvious one: No balance sheet of the "anti-terror" methods can be drawn up without investigating the role of the US government in the 9/11 attacks themselves. Despite the cover-up by the official 9/11 Commission, the available evidence indicates that US intelligence agencies had many of the airplane hijackers, including operational leader Mohammed Atta, under surveillance in 2001.

There is every reason to believe that the suicide hijackings were permitted to go forward in order to provide the pretext required to justify a massive US military intervention into Central Asia and the Persian Gulf, two of the world's largest sources of oil and gas.

Under that interpretation, the lack of any follow-up terrorist attacks after 9/11 is not due to any special security measures undertaken by the Bush administration, as Cheney claims, but rather to the fact that after 9/11, the US government had no further need of terrorist attacks at home to provide a suitable pretext for war.



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