

Obama, rendition, and the decay of American democracy

Tom Eley
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The Obama administration's decision to carry on the practice of rendition, by which "terror suspects" are spirited off to third-party countries to face torture, testifies to the profound decay of American democracy.

Rendition under Obama will be the same as the practice as it existed during the Bush administration. An anonymous source close to the White House's Task Force on Interrogation and Transfer Policies, who leaked the announcement to the *New York Times*, offered only vague assurances that prisoners would not be "rendered" to nations known to practice torture, and that diplomats would be allowed greater access.

The Bush administration made similar assurances. In fact, there is no reason for rendition except to utilize the services of those nations most hospitable to torture and impervious to public scrutiny.

The announcement comes after a week of revelations related to the lawless and anti-democratic nature of the "war on terror," which, taken together, reflect the growing power of the military-intelligence apparatus and the consolidation of the infrastructure for an American police state.

* On August 20, it was revealed that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) hired the private security firm then known as Blackwater Associates for a program of "targeted killings" of alleged Al Qaeda operatives. The CIA violated US law in failing to inform Congress of this program.

* On August 21, a *New York Times* report revealed that the Obama administration employs the same mercenary firm in the operation of the CIA's unmanned Predator drone assassination program in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

* On August 22, *Der Spiegel* confirmed that the CIA hired Blackwater to transport prisoners from Guantánamo Bay to secret prisons in Central Asia,

where they faced torture.

* On August 24, the White House made public a heavily redacted version of a CIA inspector general's report discussing cases of agency torture and murder of prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan. Among other forms of abuse, interrogators threatened inmates with death and warned that their mothers and children would be arrested and raped. The report had been suppressed since 2004 and was released in compliance with a court order stemming from a Freedom of Information suit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union.

Confronted with overwhelming evidence that its predecessor systematically violated US and international law—as well as basic human rights—the Obama administration has sought to contain the damage.

After releasing the CIA inspector general's report, Attorney General Eric Holder appointed a prosecutor to investigate a handful of torture cases discussed in the document. The purview of the investigation will be limited to "rogue" agents who supposedly went beyond the forms of torture specifically endorsed by the Bush White House. In keeping with administration policy, there will be no investigations of Bush administration officials, including Bush and his vice president, Dick Cheney, who formulated and oversaw the torture program.

Obama immediately distanced himself from even this half-measure. A spokesman repeated Obama's mantra that "we should be looking forward, not backward," while pinning responsibility for any investigation on Holder, who "ultimately is going to make the decisions."

The CIA's open opposition to the report's release and the appointment of a prosecutor approached the level of insubordination. An agency spokesman

declared that the cases had already been investigated by the Bush Justice Department.

“Justice has had the complete document since 2004, and their career prosecutors have reviewed it carefully for legal accountability,” said Paul Gimigliano. “That’s already been done.”

After the inspector general’s report was released, the CIA took the unprecedented step of releasing two classified documents whose publication had been demanded by Cheney. The former vice president claimed the documents would demonstrate the necessity of “enhanced interrogation techniques.”

Predictably, these documents made no specific reference to intelligence secured through torture. Instead, they offered lurid and unsubstantiated claims about terror plots disrupted through CIA interrogations.

Cheney returned to the attack on Tuesday, criticizing the Justice Department’s proposed investigation in the most ominous terms. It raises “doubts about this administration’s ability to be responsible for our nation’s security,” Cheney charged.

The terms of the “debate” that emerged after the publication of the inspector general’s report was very much dictated by the military-intelligence apparatus. It hinged on whether or not torture “works.” This, it was claimed, is a matter for legitimate intellectual discussion.

Current CIA Director Leon Panetta, an Obama appointee, echoed Cheney in declaring that torture had disrupted attacks. Panetta suggested that whether or not such methods are “the only way to obtain that information will remain a legitimate area of dispute, with Americans holding a range of views on the methods used.”

In this context, Obama’s declaration that rendition will continue was a transparent bid to curry favor with the military-intelligence apparatus. Even the *Times* noted that the announcement “seemed intended in part to offset the impact” of the release of the inspector general’s report.

Obama’s continuation of rendition is yet another repudiation of his campaign promises. In an article in *Foreign Affairs* in 2007, Obama said he would “eliminate the practice of extreme rendition, where we outsource our torture to other countries.”

Many of those who voted for Obama did so out of revulsion over the Bush administration’s use of torture

and other illegal methods. But, as with Obama’s anti-war posturing and his pledges to reverse the pro-corporate agenda of Bush, the campaign promises of the apostle of “change you can believe in” have proven worthless. On every essential question, the Obama administration is continuing and deepening the reactionary policies of his predecessor.

Obama’s endorsement of rendition demonstrates that the anti-democratic methods of US imperialism—torture, kidnapping, assassination, aggressive war—are not rooted in the personal characteristics of politicians and cannot be overcome by replacing one party of American imperialism by another.

The danger of a police state emerges inexorably from the turn by the ruling elite as a whole to aggressive war and militarism as a means of offsetting the deepening crisis of American capitalism. At the same time, the crisis is being used to effect a vast restructuring of class relations in the US to the benefit of the financial aristocracy which controls both parties and all the levers of state power. The social inequality that is being created is such that the brutal measures currently employed in the “war on terror” will ultimately be unleashed on the working class within the US.

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