

# Torturer-in-chief: Bush brags about waterboarding

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In a memoir to be released next week, former US President George W. Bush boasts of having personally given the order to the CIA to employ the torture method of waterboarding.

The book, titled *Decision Points*, includes Bush's recounting that when asked by the CIA whether it could subject Khalid Sheik Mohammed, an alleged leader in the September 11, 2001, terror plot, he gave the reply, "Damn right." The former president added that he would do the same thing again to "save lives."

The passage constitutes an even more explicit admission than Bush's flip statement in a speech to an audience of businessmen in Grand Rapids, Michigan, last June. The ex-president then declared: "Yeah, we waterboarded Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. I'd do it again to save lives."

The claim that suspects were being tortured in order to "save lives" is entirely self-serving. In reality, Mohammed and others were subjected to waterboarding and other torture methods by interrogators who were told to come up with evidence linking the 9/11 attacks to Iraq in order to provide a pretext for the war that the administration was determined to launch in pursuit of US strategic interests.

In a country governed by laws, international treaties and democratic principles, such admissions would provoke a public outcry, an intense political debate and the arrest and prosecution of George W. Bush.

In the United States of America of 2010, however, the former president's bragging that he ordered his subordinates to carry out torture has been greeted within the political establishment and the corporate media with an audible yawn of indifference.

The news of Bush's bragging about having ordered torture was broken by the *New York Times* Tuesday in one sentence in an online political blog. The so-called paper of record print edition relegated the matter to the ninth paragraph of a book review published in its Arts pages.

The review merely quotes Bush as writing, "had I not authorized waterboarding on senior al Qaeda leaders, I would have had to accept a greater risk that the country would be attacked." In keeping with the *Times* policy, the word "torture" does not appear.

The *Washington Post* carried an article on Bush's statement on waterboarding on Thursday. In the book, the paper reports, "Bush makes clear that he personally approved the use of that coercive technique," which the *Post* acknowledges constitutes "a practice that many international legal experts say was illicit torture." The *Post* article states that the book "reiterates" Bush's claim that waterboarding does not constitute torture.

For the rest of the media, the confirmation that the former US president personally ordered the use of torture has received far less attention than Bush's complaint in the memoir about how "deeply insulted" he was when rapper Kanye West stated on national television that "George Bush doesn't care about black people" because of his administration's response to Hurricane Katrina.

There has been no response from the Obama administration or the

Democratic congressional leadership to Bush's confession.

On Friday, a senior US State Department adviser attending a UN Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva was asked by journalists about the reports on the Bush memoir.

"I think that the Obama administration defines waterboarding as torture as a matter of law under the convention against torture and as part of our legal obligation...it's not a policy choice," the official, Harold Koh, responded.

He went on to claim that "investigations are ongoing" to determine whether anyone could be prosecuted for the practice.

"There has been a turning of the page" under the administration of President Barack Obama, Koh insisted.

This is a barefaced lie aimed at mollifying international outrage over the US embrace of torture. There has been no "turning of the page." Rather, the Obama administration has systematically covered up for the crimes of the Bush White House, while continuing the criminal policies and methods introduced by its predecessor.

Obama's Attorney General Eric Holder signaled that any investigation of Bush-era torture will be limited to whether anyone in the CIA went beyond the torture methods laid down in the Justice Department's so-called torture memos drafted to legitimize the practice. Even this limited probe has gone nowhere as the powerful US intelligence apparatus has opposed it with undisguised hostility.

As a result of Bush's order, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was waterboarded 183 times. Another alleged Al Qaeda leader, Abu Zubaydah, was waterboarded at least 83 times. The CIA acknowledged using the method against a third detainee, Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri. In 2005, it revealed that videotapes depicting the interrogations of these last two prisoners had been destroyed in an apparent attempt to eliminate evidence of torture.

This technique and others even more hideous were used in countless other interrogations by both CIA and military interrogators from Bagram airbase in Afghanistan to Abu Ghraib in Iraq and numerous so-called black sites maintained by the US intelligence agency around the world.

Bush's memoir serves to confirm once again that these crimes were not merely the responsibility of a few overzealous CIA interrogators or "rogue" enlisted personnel, but rather were carried out at the direct bidding of the president of the United States.

Waterboarding amounts to induced drowning, with the prisoner strapped to a gurney and water poured through a cloth over his mouth and nose. It can and has resulted in death. From the Spanish-American War onward, the US military treated waterboarding as a war crime, prosecuting both its enemies and, on several occasions, members of its own ranks, for utilizing this form of torture. The US State Department has regularly condemned foreign governments for torture on the basis of evidence that they utilize this barbaric method.

Yet, under the Bush administration's "war on terrorism," waterboarding and a litany of other methods ranging from sensory deprivation to sealing

prisoners into boxes containing insects, to hanging them from the ceiling in shackles, were declared not to be torture but rather “enhanced interrogation techniques.” This phrase represented virtually a literal translation of the term used by the German Gestapo 60 years earlier, *Verschärfte Vernehmung*, also as a bureaucratic euphemism for torture.

The US media fell dutifully into line with this attempt to deny torture with a terminological sleight of hand.

A study released by Harvard University’s Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy last summer found that after 70 years of describing waterboarding as torture, the leading US newspapers carried out an abrupt turn after the revelation that US interrogators were utilizing the method against alleged terror suspects.

The study found a “sudden significant shift in how newspapers characterized waterboarding.” Only 2 of 143 post-2003 articles dealing with waterboarding in the *New York Times*, for example, used the word “torture,” while only 1 out of 63 articles in the *Wall Street Journal* did so.

*New York Times* Executive Editor Bill Keller dismissed the study as “tendentious,” asserting that to describe waterboarding as “torture” would constitute “taking sides in a political dispute.”

The Democratic leadership, as was revealed last year, was repeatedly briefed on the use of waterboarding and other “enhanced interrogation techniques,” but did nothing to oppose these methods or to expose them to the American people. Among the first Democratic leaders to be informed about this use of torture was House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (Democrat, California), then the leading Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee.

If Bush feels no compunction over bragging about torture, it is in large measure because he knows that it is not just he and his inner circle of accomplices who are implicated—Vice President Dick Cheney, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, CIA Director George Tenet, Attorney General John Ashcroft and others. Rather, the entire political establishment is complicit, including the Congress, the Democratic Party, the courts and the media.

The former president is also confident that he enjoys impunity on the issue of torture because the policies of the current administration are largely in continuity with his own.

Obama’s chief counterterrorism adviser at the White House is John Brennan, a former top CIA official who publicly defended the agency’s “enhanced interrogation techniques” as well as the practice of “extraordinary rendition,” in which the agency abducted people and flew them to third countries to be interrogated and tortured.

The Obama administration has repeatedly sent the Justice Department to court to quash challenges to extraordinary rendition, torture and domestic spying, invoking a sweeping claim to the “state secrets privilege” that essentially places the executive branch above the law on all matters that it claims touch on “national security”.

It has likewise kept open the US detention camp at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and continued use of military kangaroo tribunals for the purpose of trying suspects whose cases would be compromised in regular courts because of their interrogation under torture.

And the Obama White House has gone even further than its predecessor, claiming the right to place American citizens on CIA “kill lists” to be

assassinated by death squads or drone missile attacks without being charged, much less tried, for any offense.

The United Nations Convention against Torture, signed by President Ronald Reagan 26 years ago, making all acts of torture criminal offenses under US law, applied to all those who either participate or are complicit in torture.

The treaty implicitly rejects all the US rationales for its “interrogation techniques,” stating that “no exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture.”

Governments are required by the treaty to either prosecute those accused of torture or extradite them to another country that will do so.

Bush’s memoir constitutes *prima facie* evidence that he is guilty of torture—as if any additional evidence were needed. The failure of the Obama administration to arrest him and others implicated in waterboarding and other torture methods makes it complicit in torture as well.

This complicity in and indifference towards the crime of torture pervades all sections of the US ruling elite, its government, its political parties and its media. It is symptomatic of the profound erosion of democratic processes and democratic rights within the United States, which has been driven by a decade of uninterrupted imperialist wars of aggression abroad and unprecedented social inequality at home.

Holding those responsible for these crimes accountable is a vital political task. It is required both to cleanse the political atmosphere of the stench of torture and unprovoked wars and to prevent, under conditions of an unprecedented crisis of American capitalism, these same methods being turned against working people in the US itself.

Bringing those guilty of torture to justice can be carried out only by the working class mobilizing its political strength independently against both the Obama administration and the Republicans as well as the profit system that they defend, which is the source of militarism and the war crimes it engenders.



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