

“Frontline” broadcast documents CIA torture program

Eric London
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On Tuesday, May 19, PBS aired an episode of its weekly television program “Frontline” documenting the Central Intelligence Agency’s torture of hundreds of detainees under the Bush Administration. The episode, titled “Secrets, Politics, and Torture,” reviews the CIA’s unconstitutional and illegal efforts to set up, implement, maintain, and justify an international campaign of torture.

The CIA’s torture program began in April 2002, four months before it was officially approved by the Bush administration. The administration’s approval was based on the Justice Department’s pseudo-legal justification for torture, which is unconstitutional under the Eighth Amendment’s proscription of “cruel and unusual punishment.”

Featured near the beginning of the episode is a clip from a scene of Kathryn Bigelow’s film *Zero Dark Thirty* in which a detainee undergoes torture and later gives up valuable information leading to the killing of Osama bin Laden on May 1, 2011. The central aim of the film was to convince the American people that the Bush Administration’s torture program led directly to the capture of Osama bin Laden.

“Frontline” shows Bigelow on the red carpet for the film’s opening, and quotes her saying that the killing of bin Laden was “one of the great stories of our time.”

The narrator’s voice interjects, noting that “behind the scenes, the details of the story were secretly provided to the filmmakers by the Central Intelligence Agency.”

Not only was the film put together in collaboration with the CIA, it was also a fabrication from beginning to end. As Seymour Hersh’s May 10 article in the *London Review of Books* explained, there was practically no truth to the Obama administration’s account of the killing of bin Laden.

“Frontline” episode traces the events leading up to the publishing of the Senate Intelligence Committee’s torture report on December 9, 2014, and in so doing paints a picture of a government that rules on the basis of layer upon layer of criminal conspiracies. The new vernacular created by the intelligence apparatus and employed in the episode’s narration gives the viewer a chilling sense of the measures used in the torture program: “extraordinary rendition,” “black site,” “enhanced interrogation tactics,” “rectal rehydration,” “rough takedown,” “confinement box,” “walling,” “auditory overload,” “waterboarding,” etc.

The methods themselves are detailed at length in the episode, including the confinement of the prisoner Abu Zubaydah in a box less than two feet wide and less than three feet deep for dozens of hours at a time. Another prisoner was chained to a wall and forced to stand for 17 days, while another—Gul Rahman—died, likely of hypothermia, after being shackled to a cold floor for hours.

Spliced throughout the episode are segments of interviews conducted by “Frontline” with two of the architects of the torture program, former CIA Deputy Director John McLaughlin and former CIA Deputy Legal Counsel John Rizzo. McLaughlin also served as Acting CIA Director in 2004, while Rizzo served as CIA Acting General Counsel from 2001–2002 and from 2004–2009.

The statements made by McLaughlin and Rizzo are expressions of deeply anti-democratic views at the highest levels of the US government. In justifying the brutality of the programs, McLaughlin said, “We were at war. Bad things happen in wars.”

When asked about the morality of torture, his response was:

“Wouldn’t it be equally immoral if we failed to get this information and thousands of Americans died, [if] there was another 9/11? How immoral would that be? That’s the dilemma we were up against.”

Later, McLaughlin adds, “Dealing with hard core murderers is not patty cake.”

For his part, Rizzo explained that he found efforts to ban torture to be “deeply concerning,” noting that it was “alarming” that Senator John McCain thought the CIA’s methods fit the definition of torture.

Rizzo was alarmed by these developments in part because he was aware he could be thrown in prison as a war criminal for approving the torture programs. He admits in the course of the “Frontline” interview that his efforts to “insulate” the CIA from criminal liability were “crumbling” when the Supreme Court noted in its 2006 *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld* decision that the Geneva Convention applied to detainees of the wars in the Middle East and Central Asia.

The “Frontline” episode details how the CIA, under both the Bush and Obama administrations, has exerted an immense amount of influence to provide legal immunity for the torturers. The episode notes that leading Bush administration officials pressured interrogators to continue torturing prisoners even after some interrogators noted that it was “highly unlikely” that those tortured would provide information, and that the FBI removed one of their agents from a black site when he called the FBI and asked for permission to arrest the torturers.

Video evidence of the interrogations taking place was destroyed by former CIA National Clandestine Service Director Jose Rodriguez in 2005. The CIA also feared that the tapes would spark a broad outcry of opposition to US imperialism. As *New Yorker* reporter Jane Mayer told “Frontline”, “I was told if those videos had ever been seen, the reaction around the world would not have been survivable.”

The Obama administration refused to punish Rodriguez for his clearly illegal actions. Rodriguez’s attorney, Robert Bennett, told the *Washington Post* in 2009 that he was “pleased” that the Obama administration would not press criminal charges against his client. “Jose Rodriguez is an American hero,” he said.

The Obama administration has not only kept every one of the program’s architects safe from prosecution,

it employs dozens of those involved, including CIA Director John Brennan.

As journalist Peter Baker of the *New York Times* explains during the concluding minutes of the episode, “There’s no more investigation that’s going to happen, there’s no more legal consequences that we know of and there’s no policy debate.”

Though the “Frontline” episode takes a detached tone in recounting the litany of crimes conducted at the highest levels of the American state over the past decade and a half, the fact remains that state torture is a war crime, and those responsible for the program and the subsequent cover-up—both Republican and Democrat—should be put in prison where they belong.



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