

Declassified reports reveal torture techniques used by Bush-era CIA

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Newly disclosed documents from the CIA detail the “enhanced interrogation” techniques—torture—used on detainees at black sites throughout the world. The documents, 50 in all, include information that was not presented to the Senate Intelligence Committee’s investigation into the CIA torture program in 2014.

This information has been released amid a pitched legal battle concerning the handling of the full 6,700 page document that was presented to the Senate Intelligence Committee.

The documents were released as the result of an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Freedom of Information Act suit against the CIA. The documents describe, in clinical, disinterested prose, a harrowing array of torture techniques used against suspects, from extreme humiliation to potentially deadly force.

The use of “mock burials,” in which detainees were forced into coffin-shaped boxes with hidden ventilation holes, the slamming of detainees repeatedly into walls, and the exposure of denuded detainees to extreme cold stand out as particularly inhumane practices. The documents include an investigation into the 2002 death of suspected Taliban militant Gul Rahman, who died of hypothermia at a black site north of Kabul, Afghanistan. At the time of his death, Rahman was clad in nothing but an adult diaper, and had been chained to a vent in his cell throughout a cold, November night.

Attorneys for two of the CIA’s victims, Abu Zubaydah and Abdul Rahim Al-Nashiri, are currently fighting for the preservation of the full report of the Senate Intelligence Committee’s findings, which doubtless contain even more gruesome details.

Judge Emmet G. Sullivan, who is adjudicating Zubaydah’s habeas corpus request, issued a memo demanding that the United States government “immediately” deposit a complete and un-redacted copy of the Senate report with the court by February 10. Last week, Judge Royce C. Lamberth of the Federal District Court for the District of Columbia ordered the Obama administration

to hand a copy over to the court, as well, in the case of Al-Nashiri. The Obama administration resisted on both counts.

Excerpts from the reports reveal how prisoners were subjected to torture through “walling” and waterboarding. During walling, a towel rolled up and placed behind the prisoner’s neck was the only precaution taken to ensure that the victims did not sustain concussions or spinal injuries when yanked upright by their chains and slammed into walls by their interrogators. Zubaydah was rendered unconscious and suffered seizures as a result of this treatment; to this day, he still experiences blackouts, headaches and seizures.

After three consecutive days of waterboarding, walling, and mock burials, Zubaydah was given a day-long reprieve from the aggressive interrogations. He was given Ensure, a meal replacement drink, and was again released to his cell, where interrogators disrupted his sleep purposely throughout the night. The next morning, interrogators again hooded Zubaydah and inflicted their torments upon him anew. After telling interrogators that he had no new information to offer, he was slapped and forced into a dark, upright box with a container for his waste.

Even after Zubaydah “showed distress,” he was left in the box for four hours. He was removed from this box, was walled again for two hours, and was then shoved into what interrogators called “the small confinement box.” Here, he was forced into a modified fetal position, with his back curved downward and his legs drawn up.

“Subject remained in the small box for one hour and ten minutes. Subject sounded distressed and did not appear to adapt as well to his time in the small confinement box,” interrogators recounted. He was waterboarded and walled for several more hours after being removed from the box. “Subject has not provided any new threat or elaborated on any old threat information. Medical assessment is that subject remains stable and that his physiologic condition is close to normal given his present circumstances,” the report affirmed.

Zubaydah himself remembers those events in much more excruciating detail. He told his lawyers that he remembered

“screaming unconsciously,” in pain because he was unable to stretch his legs, unbend his back, or stand upright. The documentation of his torture reveals that the small box was used to the maximum amount allowable by interrogators.

The reports substantiate claims by several detainees that interrogators drugged them with powerful pharmaceuticals without consent during interrogation—a practice regarded as unethical by medical professionals. For years, the CIA asserted that detainees were only “sedated” as a last resort, mainly as a safety measure.

However, the released documents reveal another practice entirely. In April of 2002, interrogators documented plans to transport Zubaydah “in a state of pharmaceutical unconsciousness ... to maximize the intended effect of disorienting.”

These documents have been released at a critical juncture. Obama ascended to the presidency eight years ago amid hopes that he would end the opacity and latitude the intelligence apparatus had enjoyed under Bush. Yet during his last week in office, he worked feverishly to ensure that the full, damning report of state-sanctioned torture would remain safely sealed in the presidential archives, where they would be free from public viewing until 2028. In response to Judge Royce Lamberth’s order to remand a copy to the court, Obama administration lawyers argued that doing so would endanger executive-congressional cooperation and that the document enjoyed enough protection by being included in Obama’s archives.

This action is of a piece with the rest of Obama’s presidency, which began with him granting immunity to war criminals from the Bush and Cheney era. Obama’s lukewarm expressions of distaste for torture are not borne out by his policies, through which domestic spying, extrajudicial assassinations and legalized entrapment have become standard operating procedure.

While Al-Nashiri fights for his freedom—and his life, as the Obama administration has sought the death penalty—James Mitchell, a primary architect of many Bush-era torture regimens, remains free.

Another criminal who walks free, CIA director John Brennan, worked to intimidate members of the Senate Intelligence Committee. He ordered CIA thugs to break into Senate staffers’ computers and delete information concerning the CIA’s torture program. He then brazenly claimed that those staffers should be prosecuted for possessing confidential information, and arrogantly stated that the CIA had a right to withhold information from the Senate Intelligence Committee, to which it is supposed to be answerable.

Obama doused the flames between Brennan and outraged members of the Senate committee by stating that no one

would be prosecuted. This effectively granted Brennan immunity and provided a precedent for the cover-up of war crimes.

Meanwhile, whistleblowers such as Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden, and CIA analyst John Kiriakou were punished for the “crime” of revealing the sadistic nature of military and intelligence practices. Kiriakou, particularly, stands out as a symbol for the injustice of the Obama administration; while James Mitchell boasts openly to the press about waterboarding detainees, Kiriakou was prosecuted by the Obama Justice Department and sentenced to 30 months in prison for revealing the use of waterboarding to the American public.

Many Americans are rightly concerned about the dangers posed by recently inaugurated President Donald Trump. Attorneys for victims such as Zubaydah and al-Nashiri, among others, fear that Trump could, at the behest of Senate Republicans, destroy the full Senate torture report. Trump himself has expressed support for waterboarding and other techniques; “Torture works,” he has told reporters.

Yet as abhorrent as his arrogance and his support for the detention and torture program are, it remains clear that the platform he stands upon has been reinforced by the policies pursued by Obama. History will not reveal Obama’s legacy to be one of openness or transparency, much less of equality or justice. To the contrary, it will expose his presidency as having laced up the Trump administration’s jackboots.

If Trump succeeds in destroying the damning evidence against the CIA in the Senate Intelligence Committee report, the blame will lie at the feet of Obama, who refused to declassify it and sought in the last days of his presidency to keep it from seeing the light of day.



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