

“We have to fight fire with fire”

Trump applauds torture in CIA interrogations

Patrick Martin
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In an interview with ABC News broadcast Wednesday night, President Donald Trump enthusiastically endorsed waterboarding in interrogating prisoners, and said he would consider seeking to repeal the current legal ban on torture if his top national security officials recommended it.

The interview was conducted the same day that the *Washington Post* made public a draft memorandum discussing possible reopening of CIA secret prisons overseas, where individuals seized by the US military-intelligence apparatus were taken to be tortured. The prisons were opened by the CIA after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and closed by the Bush administration after the horrific methods being used were made public in leaks to the media.

Referring to Defense Secretary James Mattis, a retired general who commanded troops in Iraq, and CIA Director Mike Pompeo, Trump told ABC, “I will rely on Pompeo and Mattis and my group. And if they don’t want to do [torture], that’s fine. If they do wanna do, then I will work toward that end. I want to do everything within the bounds of what you’re allowed to do legally.”

Both Mattis and Pompeo opposed waterboarding during their Senate confirmation hearings, Mattis emphatically. Pompeo seemed to leave the door open in responses to written questions, after initially disavowing it in his testimony to the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Asked by David Muir of ABC whether he personally advocated waterboarding, Trump replied, “But do I feel it works? Absolutely, I feel it works.” He added, “I have spoken as recently as 24 hours ago with people at the highest level of intelligence and I asked them the

question. ‘Does it work? Does torture work’—and the answer was ‘Yes, absolutely.’”

Trump repeated a claim from the 2016 election campaign, declaring that torture was required in order to match the brutality of Islamic State. “When they’re chopping off the heads of people because they happen to be a Christian in the Middle East,” he said, “when ISIS is doing things that nobody has ever heard of since medieval times, would I feel strongly about waterboarding? As far as I’m concerned, we have to fight fire with fire.”

While Trump boasts of the utility of torture, and seeks to justify it, his administration is likely to press ahead with the effort by the Obama administration to suppress the Senate Intelligence Committee report on CIA torture, which has never been made public. The executive summary of this document, which comes to nearly 600 pages, was published in December 2014. The intelligence agencies have been seeking to collect and destroy all copies of the full report.

Meanwhile, in the article published on its website Wednesday, the *Washington Post* reported on a draft executive order which “calls for a policy review that could authorize the CIA to reopen ‘black site’ prisons overseas and potentially restart an interrogation program that was dismantled in 2009 after using methods widely condemned as torture.”

The order would revoke a 2009 decision by Barack Obama to formally end the CIA interrogation program and reinstate a version of the program approved by George W. Bush which included “rendition,” the kidnapping of “terrorist” suspects and their transfer to third countries willing to host a CIA torture center.

The most notorious such “black sites” were in

Poland, Romania and on the British possession of Diego Garcia, an isolated island in the Indian Ocean, but as many as 54 countries were involved in the program, counting those that permitted CIA-chartered planes to refuel and overfly as they transported prisoners to the torture centers.

In some cases, as with the military dictatorship in Egypt and the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, the CIA contracted out the abuse of prisoners to local government torturers, who worked in collaboration with the agency.

White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer told reporters Wednesday that the draft order was “not a White House document” but refused to comment on the substance of the *Post* report.

Other officials told the press, on a background basis, that there was no immediate likelihood of the CIA resuming the secret prisons. At least in part this is because many of the governments previously involved, like Poland’s, are at odds with Trump’s professed desire for better relations with Russia, and therefore unlikely to be willing to host a secret torture prison.

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