

CIA Tactics Endorsed In Secret Memos

Waterboarding Got White House Nod

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Global Research, October 16, 2008

Washington Post 16 October 2008

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#),
[Intelligence](#)

Washington Post, October 15, 2008. The Bush administration issued a pair of secret memos to the CIA in 2003 and 2004 that explicitly endorsed the agency's use of interrogation techniques such as waterboarding against al-Qaeda suspects — documents prompted by worries among intelligence officials about a possible backlash if details of the program became public.

The classified memos, which have not been previously disclosed, were requested by then-CIA Director George J. Tenet more than a year after the start of the secret interrogations, according to four administration and intelligence officials familiar with the documents. Although Justice Department lawyers, beginning in 2002, had signed off on the agency's interrogation methods, senior CIA officials were troubled that White House policymakers had never endorsed the program in writing.

The memos were the first — and, for years, the only — tangible expressions of the administration's consent for the CIA's use of harsh measures to extract information from captured al-Qaeda leaders, the sources said. As early as the spring of 2002, several White House officials, including then-national security adviser Condoleezza Rice and Vice President Cheney, were given individual briefings by Tenet and his deputies, the officials said. Rice, in a statement to congressional investigators last month, confirmed the briefings and acknowledged that the CIA director had pressed the White House for "policy approval."

The repeated requests for a paper trail reflected growing worries within the CIA that the administration might later distance itself from key decisions about the handling of captured al-Qaeda leaders, former intelligence officials said. The concerns grew more pronounced after the revelations of mistreatment of detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, and further still as tensions grew between the administration and its intelligence advisers over the conduct of the Iraq war.

"It came up in the daily meetings. We heard it from our field officers," said a former senior intelligence official familiar with the events. "We were already worried that we" were going to be blamed.

A. John Radsan, a lawyer in the CIA general counsel's office until 2004, remembered the discussions but did not personally view the memos the agency received in response to its concerns. "The question was whether we had enough 'top cover,'" Radsan said.

Tenet first pressed the White House for written approval in June 2003, during a meeting with members of the National Security Council, including Rice, the officials said. Days later, he got what he wanted: a brief memo conveying the administration's approval for the CIA's

interrogation methods, the officials said.

Administration officials confirmed the existence of the memos, but neither they nor former intelligence officers would describe their contents in detail because they remain classified. The sources all spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not cleared to discuss the events.

The second request from Tenet, in June 2004, reflected growing worries among agency officials who had just witnessed the public outcry over the Abu Ghraib scandal. Officials who held senior posts at the time also spoke of deteriorating relations between the CIA and the White House over the war in Iraq — a rift that prompted some to believe that the agency needed even more explicit proof of the administration's support.

"The CIA by this time is using the word 'insurgency' to describe the Iraq conflict, so the White House is viewing the agency with suspicion," said a second former senior intelligence official.

As recently as last month, the administration had never publicly acknowledged that its policymakers knew about the specific techniques, such as waterboarding, that the agency used against high-ranking terrorism suspects. In her unprecedented account to lawmakers last month, Rice, now secretary of state, portrayed the White House as initially uneasy about a controversial CIA plan for interrogating top al-Qaeda suspects.

After learning about waterboarding and similar tactics in early 2002, several White House officials questioned whether such harsh measures were "effective and necessary . . . and lawful," Rice said. Her concerns led to an investigation by the Justice Department's criminal division into whether the techniques were legal.

But whatever misgivings existed that spring were apparently overcome. Former and current CIA officials say no such reservations were voiced in their presence.

In interviews, the officials recounted a series of private briefings about the program with members of the administration's security team, including Rice and Cheney, followed by more formal meetings before a larger group including then-Attorney General John D. Ashcroft, then-White House counsel Alberto R. Gonzales and then-Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld. None of the officials recalled President Bush being present at any of the discussions.

Several of the key meetings have been previously described in news articles and books, but Rice last month became the first Cabinet-level official to publicly confirm the White House's awareness of the program in its earliest phases. In written responses to questions from the Senate Armed Services Committee, Rice said Tenet's description of the agency's interrogation methods prompted her to investigate further to see whether the program violated U.S. laws or international treaties, according to her written responses, dated Sept. 12 and released late last month.

"I asked that . . . Ashcroft personally advise the NSC principles whether the program was lawful," Rice wrote.

Current and former intelligence officials familiar with the briefings described Tenet as supportive of enhanced interrogation techniques, which the officials said were developed by

CIA officers after the agency's first high-level captive, al-Qaeda operative Zayn al-Abidin Muhammed Hussein, better known as Abu Zubaida, refused to cooperate with interrogators.

"The CIA believed then, and now, that the program was useful and helped save lives," said a former senior intelligence official knowledgeable about the events. "But in the agency's view, it was like this: 'We don't want to continue unless you tell us in writing that it's not only legal but is the policy of the administration.' "

One administration official familiar with the meetings said the CIA made such a convincing case that no one questioned whether the methods were necessary to prevent further terrorist attacks.

"The CIA had the White House boxed in," said the official. "They were saying, 'It's the only way to get the information we needed, and — by the way — we think there's another attack coming up.' It left the principals in an extremely difficult position and put the decision-making on a very fast track."

But others who were present said Tenet seemed more interested in protecting his subordinates than in selling the administration on a policy that administration lawyers had already authorized.

"The suggestion that someone from CIA came in and browbeat everybody is ridiculous," said one former agency official familiar with the meeting. "The CIA understood that it was controversial and would be widely criticized if it became public," the official said of the interrogation program. "But given the tenor of the times and the belief that more attacks were coming, they felt they had to do what they could to stop the attack."

The CIA's anxiety was partly fueled by the lack of explicit presidential authorization for the interrogation program. A secret White House "memorandum of notification" signed by Bush on Sept. 15, 2001, gave the agency broad authority to wage war against al-Qaeda, including killing and capturing its members. But it did not spell out how captives should be handled during interrogation.

But by the time the CIA requested written approval of its policy, in June 2003, the population of its secret prisons had grown from one to nine, including Khalid Sheik Mohammed, the alleged principal architect of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. Three of the detainees had been subjected to waterboarding, which involves strapping a prisoner to a board, covering his face and pouring water over his nose and mouth to simulate drowning.

By the spring of 2004, the concerns among agency officials had multiplied, in part because of shifting views among administration lawyers about what acts might constitute torture, leading Tenet to ask a second time for written confirmation from the White House. This time the reaction was far more reserved, recalled two former intelligence officials.

"The Justice Department in particular was resistant," said one former intelligence official who participated in the discussions. "They said it doesn't need to be in writing."

Tenet and his deputies made their case in yet another briefing before the White House national security team in June 2004. It was to be one of the last such meetings for Tenet, who had already announced plans to step down as CIA director. Author Jane Mayer, who described the briefing in her recent book, "The Dark Side," said the graphic accounts of interrogation appeared to make some participants uncomfortable. "History will not judge us

kindly," Mayer quoted Ashcroft as saying.

Participants in the meeting did not recall whether a vote was taken. Several weeks passed, and Tenet left the agency without receiving a formal response.

Finally, in mid-July, a memo was forwarded to the CIA reaffirming the administration's backing for the interrogation program. Tenet had acquired the statement of support he sought.

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