

New Senate Intelligence Committee Chair Moves to Suppress CIA Torture Report

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Global Research, January 25, 2015

[World Socialist Web Site](#) 24 January 2015

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Law and Justice](#)

The new Republican chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Senator Richard Burr of North Carolina, sent a letter last week to the White House demanding the Obama administration return all copies of the full report on CIA torture whose executive summary was made public last month.

The letter to Obama asked that “all copies of the full and final report in the possession of the executive branch be returned immediately,” according to several press reports. The request is unprecedented in relations between the legislative and executive branch, where historically it is usually the legislature seeking more information and the executive branch declining to provide it.

In this case, the legislative branch is seeking to recall (and likely suppress) copies of a report which the new majority in the Senate regards as too critical of the CIA and too revealing of the methods employed by the intelligence agency in its brutal interrogations of prisoners at secret “black site” facilities in Europe and Asia, as well as at Guantanamo Bay.

The Senate Intelligence Committee produced a 6,900-page report on the CIA torture program, which still remains completely secret. The 512-page executive summary was released last month, albeit with extensive redactions, along with dissenting opinions by the Republican minority on the panel and by the CIA itself.

While official Washington and the corporate-controlled media have largely shelved the report, after an initial flurry of publicity, the executive summary has become a best seller with the American public. When a small publisher brought out the executive summary as a paperback book December 31, the entire 50,000-copy press run was sold out the first day, making a second press run necessary to meet the demand.

Senator Burr did not give any public explanation for seeking the return of copies of the full report, but press accounts suggested that he was seeking to put the document out of reach of requests under the Freedom of Information Act, which applies to the executive branch but not to Congress.

The White House, the CIA, the FBI and other executive branch agencies have occasionally been forced to divulge documents under court order following FOIA lawsuits filed by news organizations or civil liberties groups.

Restricting the number of copies circulating in Washington would also make it less likely that the document would be leaked to the press.

Burr has defended the brutal practices employed by CIA interrogators, including waterboarding, sadistic beatings, sodomizing prisoners through “rectal rehydration”, and lengthy sleep deprivation. He has also denounced the Intelligence Committee report’s conclusion that CIA officials lied to both Congress and the White House about the torture program and its results.

The Republican senator has adamantly opposed any investigation into CIA crimes since he joined the Intelligence Committee. He was once quoted saying that he opposed any public hearings of any kind on the activities of the US intelligence apparatus, on grounds of “national security.”

In his letter to Obama, Burr said that he considered the report “to be highly classified and a committee sensitive document,” and insisted that it “should not be entered into any executive branch system of records.”

Burr also indicated he would return to the CIA an internal CIA document, dubbed the “Panetta review.” This document was a 1,000-page internal review of the torture program prepared for Leon Panetta, then the director of the CIA, in 2010. According to those who have read it, the Panetta review contradicts the public posture of the CIA that the torture program was consistent with international law and effective in gaining intelligence on future terrorist attacks.

Senate committee staff came across the Panetta review in the course of the examination of more than 6 million pages of CIA material on the torture program. The agency had intended to withhold this document from the committee, even though the panel is supposed to exercise legislative oversight over the operations of the intelligence agencies, and the Panetta review was clearly relevant to the committee investigation.

The Panetta review became the occasion for further CIA crimes, as the agency assigned a group of five agents to find out how the Senate committee staff had gained access to the document. These agents conducted surveillance of the Senate panel’s computer system, including email exchanges. Senator Dianne Feinstein, then the committee’s chairman, denounced this surveillance as illegal and unconstitutional in a speech last March on the floor of the Senate.

CIA Director John Brennan initially denied the spying on the Senate committee had taken place but was later forced to admit it and issue an apology to the committee. The whole matter was then swept under the rug, with a CIA review panel deciding earlier this month that no charges would be brought against any of the five agents.

Now the new Republican chairman of the committee plans to return the Panetta review to the CIA, burying the issue for good.

Several Democratic members of the Intelligence Committee publicly opposed Burr’s actions. Feinstein issued a statement January 20 saying, “I strongly disagree that the administration should relinquish copies of the full committee study, which contains far more detailed records than the public executive summary.”

Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon said returning the document would “aid defenders of torture who are seeking to cover up the facts and rewrite the historical record.”

However, these Democrats all accepted the countless redactions demanded by the CIA in

the executive summary, with the support of the White House, and have rubber-stamped Obama's decision that neither the CIA torturers nor the White House and Justice Department officials who approved the torture program would be prosecuted.

Feinstein, Wyden & Co. agreed from the very beginning to focus the investigation solely on the CIA itself, and leave out President Bush, Vice President Cheney, and other top officials who ordered and sanctioned torture and created the spurious legal rationales for it.

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