

Obama Defends CIA Torturers

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President Barack Obama went before the television cameras Friday afternoon to defend CIA Director John Brennan and the agency itself, while admitting for the first time that the CIA tortured prisoners at secret “black site” prisons. “We tortured some folks,” Obama declared almost casually. He then proceeded to excuse and justify the torturers.

In the course of his White House press conference, Obama declared his “full confidence” in Brennan only one day after the release of a CIA inspector general’s report that exposed the CIA chief as a brazen liar. Brennan had denounced claims by the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Dianne Feinstein, of illegal and unconstitutional CIA spying on the committee staff, which was investigating the CIA torture program carried out during the administration of George W. Bush. The inspector general’s report admitted that the spying had taken place.

The CIA’s surveillance of the Senate, which is legally mandated to oversee the agency, is a stark expression of the unchecked powers of the unelected spooks and generals who run the intelligence and military agencies. The fact that the top US spy agency can carry out secret torture programs, act to sabotage a congressional probe of this criminal activity, and then go scot-free reflects the disintegration of American democracy and the emergence, behind the formal trappings of elections, etc., of the framework of a police state.

Obama’s discussion of torture deserves to be considered in some detail, because his argument summarizes in a few sentences the sophistries and lies employed by official Washington to cover up its crimes against the world’s population.

He began: “In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, we did some things that were wrong. We did a whole lot of things that were right, but we tortured some folks. We did some things that were contrary to our values.”

Torture was not a blemish on the otherwise pristine “values” of American imperialism, but an expression of its violent and reactionary character. The US government has killed many millions of people in imperialist wars over the past half-century, from Korea and Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition to torturing prisoners directly, it has subcontracted out the dirty work to dozens of murderous regimes, from Pinochet in Chile to the Shah of Iran to the Saudi monarchs and Egyptian generals of today.

Obama continued: “I understand why it happened. I think it’s important when we look back to recall how afraid people were after the Twin Towers fell and the Pentagon had been hit and the plane in Pennsylvania had fallen and people did not know whether more attacks were imminent, and there was enormous pressure on our law enforcement and our national security teams to try to deal with this.”

The “pressure” on the CIA to engage in torture did not come from the “people,” however, but from top officials of the Bush administration, starting with President Bush and Vice President Cheney. Leading congressional Democrats were kept well informed of what was taking place at CIA “black sites” overseas, but the American people were deliberately kept in the dark by the US government so that it could conduct its repressive measures with a minimum of opposition.

Obama added: “It’s important for us to not feel too sanctimonious in retrospect about the tough job that those folks had. A lot of those folks were working hard under enormous pressure and are real patriots, but having said all that, we did some things that were wrong.”

This was aimed at reassuring the CIA that there would be no consequences arising from the release next week of a declassified version of the Senate Intelligence Committee’s report on the torture program, known in agency jargon as Rendition/Detention/Interrogation (RDI).

The full 6,300-page report will remain classified, but a 400-page summary is to be released after heavy editing by CIA officials, including many of those directly responsible for the “black sites.” The *New York Times* reported last week that as many as 200 agents active in the torture program still work at the CIA, many of them now occupying senior positions.

Among them is Brennan himself, who, as a high-level official in the CIA during the Bush administration, helped oversee the torture program and publicly defended it. Obama had wanted to promote Brennan to the top post in the CIA at the beginning of his first term in 2009, but withdrew his nomination at the time because of Brennan’s association with Bush-era torture programs and concerns that he might fail to secure Senate ratification.

Instead, Obama made Brennan his top counter-terrorism adviser, where he oversaw the administration’s drone assassination program. Once reelected, Obama moved to place Brennan at the head of the main US spy agency. The Senate ratified the nomination by a comfortable margin, with the overwhelming support of Senate Democrats.

Obama’s admission that “we tortured some folks” has definite significance under the International Convention on Torture. If the US government declines to prosecute the torturers—as Obama has repeatedly indicated—this could trigger legal actions by other governments or international tribunals.

Obama concluded his remarks by claiming, in a particularly obscene comment, that “we have to, as a country, take responsibility.” This from the president who declared in 2009 that no one should be prosecuted for any of the crimes committed under the Bush administration—wars based on lies, torture, illegal surveillance—because his administration wanted to “look forward, not backward.”

Obama’s claim to have halted the torture of alleged terrorists is absurd and worthless under conditions where he not only acts to shield the torturers from criminal prosecution, or, indeed, any other form of accountability, but promotes them to head the US intelligence apparatus. His own words—following his admission of ordering the drone assassination of US citizens—brand him as a war criminal.

The American people are not responsible for torture by the CIA, or for drone missile assassinations, imperialist wars and other crimes committed by the US military-intelligence

apparatus. The American people do not control the machinery of violence and repression headquartered in Washington. Proof of that lies in the fact, as the revelations of Edward Snowden have made clear, that the main target of US government surveillance efforts—and ultimately of US government violence—is the American population itself.

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