

Top White House Officials Discussed and Approved Torture, Rice Admits

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White House officials discussed torturing suspected “enemy combatants” early in 2002, according to a detailed questionnaire put to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice by Senate investigators. The Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) released a series of new [documents](#) that shed additional light on the origins of U.S. torture policies. The Washington Post [reports](#),

The details of the controversial program were discussed in multiple meetings inside the White House over a two-year period, triggering concerns among several officials who worried that the agency’s methods might be illegal or violate anti-torture treaties, according to separate statements signed by Rice and her top legal adviser. (“Top Officials Knew in 2002 of Harsh Interrogations,” Joby Warrick, The Washington Post, Thursday, September 25, 2008; A07)

John Bellinger III, Rice’s legal adviser at the State Department and during her tenure at the National Security Council (NSC), said in answer to written questions by Senate investigators, “I expressed concern that the proposed CIA interrogation techniques comply with applicable U.S. law, including our international obligations.”

As The New York Times [reported](#),

The documents provide new details about the still-murky early months of the C.I.A.’s detention program, when the agency began using a set of harsh interrogation techniques weeks before the Justice Department issued a written legal opinion in August 2002 authorizing their use. Congressional investigators have long tried to determine exactly who authorized these techniques before the legal opinion was completed. (Mark Mazzetti, “Bush Aides Linked to Talks on Interrogations,” The New York Times, September 25, 2008)

In other words, as with the invasion and occupation of Iraq, indeed as with a host of other illegal White House programs across the entire “battlespace” of the “war on terror,” legal niceties were supplied by the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) and then crafted, as with pre-war intelligence, “to fit the policy” (torture) already in place.

The Times reported that “Justice Department lawyers gave oral guidance to the C.I.A. before the secret memo was completed.” Fearful of prosecution, CIA lawyers ordered the use of “harsh techniques” employed by CIA officers “suspended” until their formal authorization by White House proxies in the Justice Department.

Mazzetti reported that former National Security Council legal adviser Bellinger wrote “that

during the White House meetings, Justice Department lawyers frequently issued oral guidance to the C.I.A. about the interrogation program. One who did was John Yoo, the principal author of the August 2002 memo, Mr. Bellinger said.”

As ABC News [revealed](#) in April,

In dozens of top-secret talks and meetings in the White House, the most senior Bush administration officials discussed and approved specific details of how high-value al Qaeda suspects would be interrogated by the Central Intelligence Agency, sources tell ABC News. (“Sources: Top Bush Advisors Approved ‘Enhanced Interrogation’,” Jan Crawford Greenburg, Howard L. Rosenberg and Ariane de Vogue, ABC News, April 9, 2008)

As chair of the National Security Council, Rice presided over the meetings but when the ABC News story first broke, the White House declined to comment on her participation. With good reason, as it turns out!

In 2002, the National Security Council’s Principals Committee included Vice President Cheney, Rice, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell as well as CIA Director George Tenet and U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft.

According to ABC News “Rice chaired the meetings, which took place in the White House Situation Room and were typically attended by most of the principals or their deputies.” Discussions around specific techniques to be used by CIA interrogators were so detailed, ABC News reported, they “were almost choreographed” by high-level Bush administration officials.

The network also reported that at one meeting, Ashcroft famously complained: “Why are we talking about this in the White House? History will not judge this kindly.” Nor would federal prosecutors if America were a “normal” country.

Viewed as an exemplary means of expanding executive power, Cheney’s shop instructed the Office of Legal Counsel to write a series of still-classified memos that gave the CIA formal legal authority to use what the administration and corporate media euphemistically call “enhanced interrogation techniques” on alleged al-Qaeda suspects.

The Bybee-Yoo memos, with major input from Cheney’s legal adviser (now Chief of Staff), David Addington, are referred to as a “Golden Shield” for CIA repressors fearful of future prosecution as war criminals.

In her response to the question posed by Senate investigators, “Where did it [discussion of prisoner interrogation] take place (e.g., meeting at the Pentagon, etc)?” Rice confirmed ABC’s report, “All of the meetings I attended on these matters occurred inside the White House.”

When pressed by investigators: “Were you present at a meeting at which the OLC gave oral advice about the legality of interrogation techniques proposed for or in use by the CIA?” the Secretary of State replied, “I was present in meetings at which DoJ lawyers provided legal advice about the CIA program. I recall that John Yoo provided advice at several of these meetings. I do not recall if other members of OLC were also present. ... I do not know whether any oral advice provided by OLC attorneys differed from OLC’s written advice.”

But as congressional investigators and media reports have previously revealed, the OLC's "oral advice" most certainly did not differ from their "written advice" since it was supplied by torture-enabler Yoo who acted as a proxy for Cheney's legal adviser, David Addington.

SASC investigators then turned their attention to the Pentagon's Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape (SERE) programs. "On July 25, 2002 the Chief of Staff to the Joint Personnel Recovery Agency (JPRA) informed the DoD Office of the General Counsel [run by Addington protégé William J. Haynes II], that 'JPRA will continue to offer exploitation assistance to those governmental organizations charged with the mission of gleaning intelligence from enemy detainees.' Were you aware that JPRA was offering such assistance?" Rice replied, "I am unfamiliar with the JPRA and am unaware of whether it offered any assistance with interrogations."

Investigators then questioned NSC legal adviser John Bellinger III. Right from the start, Bellinger played the "Alberto Gonzales card" in his written responses: "The Committee's questions relate to events that occurred five and six years ago while I served as NSC Legal Adviser during an extraordinarily busy and taxing period. In many cases, I simply do not recall the specific details the Committee has requested." (emphasis added)

To the questions: "Was there any discussion(s) of specific interrogation techniques used or proposed for use in detainee interrogations?" And: "Was there any discussion(s) about physical and/or psychological pressures used in SERE training?" Bellinger replied: "I was present at meetings in 2002 and 2003 with some or most of the listed individuals at which specific interrogation techniques used or proposed for use in detainee interrogations by the CIA was discussed." And: "I was present in meetings at which SERE training was discussed. I recall being told that numerous U.S. military personnel had undergone SERE training without significant ill-effect."

But the policy on the use of reverse-engineered SERE tactics had already decided upon months earlier by Rumsfeld's Pentagon. Indeed, an April 16, 2002 email from Dr. Bruce Jessen, an outsourced psychologist employed by JPRA and the CIA, to Col. Randy Moulton, the Commander of the Joint Personnel Recovery Agency (JPRA) and copied to two other contractors, Christopher Wirts and Mike Dozier demonstrate JPRA's enthusiasm for the project. Entitled: "Draft Exploitation Plan," Jessen writes,

Sir,

My initial draft plan. If you decide to proceed with this I will have more details to add to this skeleton.

I am sending this to Mike and Chris so they can operationalize my draft into a CONOP [Concept of Operations] for your consideration.

Bruce

Jessen's "concept" has been conveniently redacted from SASC documents but Moulton's reply is significant in that JPRA's Commander whole-heartedly endorsed reverse-engineering SERE techniques for prisoner torture.

Doc,

We need to craft a 10-12 slide briefing to take up for approval to include what generated this requirement, why we (USG) need it, how it falls within our

Chartered responsibilities (or if not, why we should do it) and then make a recommendation.

Colonel Randy Moulton

Commander JPRA

Jessen, as we've subsequently learned, supplied what JPRA and their Pentagon masters were looking for in spades. Along with partner James Mitchell, another outsourced psychologist employed by JPRA and the CIA, the duo's Spokane, Washington-based Mitchell, Jessen & Associates was located close to the Air Force's SERE school program. The pair, along with military psychologists, did the heavy-lifting to tailor SERE for CIA and Pentagon torture programs. According to investigative journalist Jane Meyer,

Soon, the former SERE psychologists were training CIA interrogators and advising the CIA on implementing a program that one knowledgeable source describes as "a Clockwork Orange kind of approach." As psychologists they were unusually well-equipped to understand the human psyche. (Jane Meyer, *The Dark Side*, New York: Doubleday, 2008, p. 163)

"Well-equipped" indeed. According to SASC Chairman Senator Carl Levin, in July 2002, Richard Shiffrin, a Pentagon Deputy General Counsel called Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Baumgartner, the Chief of Staff at the Joint Personnel Recovery Agency (JPRA) "and asked for information on SERE techniques." Baumgartner responded by drafting a memo with three attachments. According to Levin's June 17, 2008 [statement](#) and supporting [documentation](#) released by the SASC,

One of those attachments (TAB 3) listed physical and psychological pressures used in SERE resistance training including sensory deprivation, sleep disruption, stress positions, waterboarding, and slapping. It also made reference to a section of the JPRA instructor manual that talks about "coercive pressures" like keeping the lights on at all times, and treating a person like an animal. Another attachment (TAB 4), written by Dr. Ogrisseg, also a witness today, assessed the long-term psychological effects of SERE resistance training on students and the effects of the waterboard.

During SASC hearings last Thursday, Colonel Steven Kleinman, a senior officer at the Air Force Academy who supervised that service's SERE program said in testimony he was "shocked" when he witnessed use of the harsh physical and psychological tactics used to train combat pilots facing potential capture during hostile encounters, employed haphazardly on Iraqis in a U.S. prison camp.

Kleinman told Senate investigators that SERE training "had morphed into a form of punishment for those who wouldn't cooperate." He testified that he told the task force commander "that the methods were unlawful and were in violation of the Geneva Conventions."

But as we now know, SERE techniques were reverse-engineered on orders from the highest levels of the Defense Department and the Vice President's office precisely as a mechanism to break recalcitrant "al-Qaeda" and Iraqi prisoners stripped by White House lawyers of all rights under the Geneva Conventions.

Disingenuously however, Kleinman claimed that SERE tactics were adopted from torture methods used by "Chinese communists." While historically accurate up to a point, Kleinman

failed to disclose their current provenance: the decades-long programs developed by both the CIA and U.S. Military Intelligence that refined crude Stalinist-era methods of psychological torture.

After the Korean war, the CIA embarked on a nightmarish program, [MKULTRA](#). Indeed, as I [wrote](#) in April, the programs employed at Guantánamo Bay, CIA “black sites” in Europe and Afghanistan and at prisons across Iraq were a distillation of coercive techniques devised during the 1950s and 1960s by MKULTRA psychiatrists.

Indeed, as Scott Shane reported in [The New York Times](#), a 1957 Air Force study titled “Communist Attempts to Elicit False Confessions From Air Force Prisoners of War,” written by Albert D. Biderman, a sociologist, served as one of the primary sources of the CIA’s torture manual, “[KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation](#).”

CIA-Military Intelligence PSYWAR programs were further crystallized with the publication of the “[Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual-1983](#)” (HRE). The secret manual, compiled from sections of the KUBARK guidelines and from U.S. Military Intelligence field manuals were “written in the mid 1960s as part of the Army’s Foreign Intelligence Assistance Program code-named ‘Project X’,” The National Security Archive reports.

In other words, while “Chinese communists” may have gotten the psychological torture ball rolling, the United States Government’s intelligence apparatus picked it up and ran with it.

The “refined” methods described in KUBARK and HRE included: forced drugging, hooding, sexual humiliation, extended sensory deprivation, prolonged interrogation, environmental and dietary manipulation, beatings, stress positions and other methods of “self-inflicted pain.” CIA officers and their Military Intelligence doppelgängers, at the urging of White House masters, systematically committed war crimes on defenseless prisoners in their custody.

In a major breakthrough that demolished the mendacious claims of the Bush regime, [documents](#) released by the Senate Armed Service Committee in June, provided irrefutable evidence that top Pentagon and CIA officials sought out military and “outsourced” mercenary personnel, including psychologists like Jessen and Mitchell, precisely to reverse-engineer SERE tactics for use on prisoners designated “enemy combatants” by the administration.

Psychoanalyst [Stephen Soldz](#), [Salon](#) investigative journalist Mark Benjamin and Jane Meyer’s reports in [The New Yorker](#) have all documented that moves by Behavioral Science Consultation Teams (BSCT) tasked to the Guantánamo Bay detention facility, followed hot on the heels of explicit demands by the Bush torture team to “take the gloves off.” At Guantánamo and elsewhere, BSCT psychologists held operational positions and did not function as mental health providers but rather, were present at Guantánamo for the purpose of instructing personnel in the use of “enhanced interrogation” tactics, torture.

While hearings by the Senate Armed Services Committee has provided solid evidence of widespread human rights abuses by the Bush administration and their minions, the Democratic-controlled Congress has systematically failed to bring these war criminals to justice.

There is no mistaking the pattern: given ample opportunity to purge the American political

landscape of these miscreants, Congress has abnegated its legal right and moral duty to remove Bushist malefactors from power.

With “impeachment off the table,” as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi infamously declared in 2006, from preemptive wars of conquest to warrantless wiretapping, and from the systematic looting of the economy to the heinous torture of prisoners of war, the Democratic Party is fully complicit with the Bush administration’s high crimes and misdemeanors.

The cover-up continues...

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