

Extra Feature Story

Torture Fight Rages On, Even After Policy Change, May 15, 2009

President Barack Obama has called for an end to interrogation techniques of terrorism suspects he considers torture, but there is an intense debate about whether to prosecute Bush administration officials who authorized the interrogations and whether top Democrats in Congress knew about them.

The torture issue intensified after President Obama released previously secret Bush administration legal memos that justified the use of "enhanced interrogation techniques" on terrorism suspects after the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York and Washington.

At an April press conference, the Obama administration said that the simulated drowning technique called waterboarding used on alleged 9/11 ringleader Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was torture and violated America's ideals and values.

"I do believe that it is torture. I don't think that's just my opinion; that's the opinion of many who've examined the topic. And that's why I put an end to these practices. I am absolutely convinced it was the right thing to do," the president said.

Speaker Pelosi denies she knew about torture

In response to criticism of Bush-era policies, Republicans claimed that Democrats such as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, knew about the use of waterboarding and did nothing to stop it.

Pelosi, who was on the House committee that oversees the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) received regular briefings on top secret issues of national security.

Pelosi said in a news conference this week that in 2002, the CIA told her that they were interested in using "enhanced techniques" but they said they were not using waterboarding.

She had previously claimed she was never told about the policies, but now claims the CIA misled her into believing they were not being used.

There is no evidence thus far to support either Pelosi or her Republican critics.

Critics call for an investigation

President Obama has not declared publicly whether he wants to see Bush administration officials and their lawyers investigated for authorizing the CIA to torture prisoners. Torture is against the law in the United States.

Rhode Island Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, a Democrat, told the NewsHour that the Senate Intelligence Committee has the responsibility to "make sure that misconduct that was done under the Bush administration is investigated, is revealed, and is not repeated."

Fellow Senator and Democrat Patrick Leahy of Vermont has called for an independent "truth commission" that would reveal the details of how torture policy was decided.

Attorney General Eric Holder, who runs the Department of Justice, said his staff will "follow the evidence where it takes us."

Did torture work?

A major issue in the debate, aside from figuring out the legality of Bush administration policies, is whether depriving prisoners of sleep, slamming them into walls, and making them think they were drowning helped reveal useful information about upcoming attacks.

Former Vice President Dick Cheney, whose office was at the center of detainee policy during the Bush administration, claims that the interrogation techniques were vital in protecting America from terrorist attacks.

Others have said that the torture wasn't necessary.

Ali Soufan, a former FBI counterterrorism official, told a Senate committee that the Bush administration interrogation techniques were "slow, ineffective, unreliable, and harmful to the nation's efforts to defeat Al Qaeda."

Soufan said he successfully gained useful information, in March 2002, from the first al-Qaida suspect capture by the United States using nonviolent interrogation techniques before the CIA and contractors took over and started to abuse the suspect.

Obama decides not to release photos of abuse

Meanwhile, a legal battle is brewing over photos of interrogation that President Obama initially planned to release, but later decided might inflame anti-American anger and endanger troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The photos, reportedly similar to the ones that emerged in 2004 from the infamous U.S.-run Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, are at the center of a lawsuit brought by the American Civil Liberties Union.

"The decision to not release the photographs makes a mockery of President Obama's promise of transparency and accountability," said ACLU attorney Amrit Singh.

"It is essential that these photographs be released so that the public can examine for itself the full scale and scope of prisoner abuse that was conducted in its name."

The case is being appealed and might make it to the Supreme Court.

-- **Compiled by Quinn Bowman for NewsHour Extra**

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