



Senate Intelligence Committee Releases Report on CIA Torture

The Senate Intelligence Committee on December 9 released its report on the torture — including “waterboarding” — of prisoners held by the Central Intelligence Agency during the George W. Bush administration. The report was ordered released by the Intelligence Committee chairman, Sen. Diane Feinstein (D-Calif.) and a copy was posted on the committee’s webpage. ([Click here](#) to view the report.)



The news of the report’s impending release produced immediate contrasting statements from Washington political leaders, with Republicans generally being highly critical of the report and Democrats defending it.

The redacted summary released today had the names of CIA personnel, countries that hosted the agency’s secret prisons, and other sensitive data blacked out.

Prominent among the voices defending the CIA and criticizing the report was Bush administration Vice President Dick Cheney. Cheney said on December 8 in a telephone interview with the *New York Times* that he had not read the report, but from news reports about it he had heard nothing to change his mind about the wisdom or effectiveness of the program.

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“What I keep hearing out there is they portray this as a rogue operation, and the agency was way out of bounds and then they lied about it,” said Cheney. “I think that’s all a bunch of hooey. The program was authorized. The agency did not want to proceed without authorization, and it was also reviewed legally by the Justice Department before they undertook the program,” he continued.

Cheney said he never believed the CIA was withholding information from him or the White House about the program, nor did he think the agency exaggerated the value of the intelligence gained from waterboarding and other techniques widely considered to be torture. “They deserve a lot of praise,” he said. “As far as I’m concerned, they ought to be decorated, not criticized,” he said.

Cheney (along with Bush’s Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice) is a member of the internationalist Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and can be considered as a textbook example of a neoconservative.

Perhaps surprisingly, Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.), who shares CFR membership and similar neoconservative, interventionist foreign policy views with Cheney, spoke in defense of the report:

I commend Chairman Feinstein and her staff for their diligence in seeking a truthful accounting of policies I hope we will never resort to again. I thank them for persevering against persistent opposition from many members of the intelligence community, from officials in two administrations, and from some of our colleagues.

The truth is sometimes a hard pill to swallow, said McCain from the Senate floor as the report was



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released. "It is sometimes used by our enemies in attempts to hurt us. But the American people are entitled to it, nonetheless.... I have long believed some of these practices amounted to torture, as a reasonable person would define it, especially, but not only the practice of waterboarding, which is a mock execution and an exquisite form of torture. Its use was shameful and unnecessary."

Something McCain said in his statement indicated that being tortured by the North Vietnamese while he was a prisoner of war may be responsible for his disapproval of "enhanced interrogation." He recalled, "I know from personal experience that the abuse of prisoners will produce more bad than good intelligence."

A pair of Republican senators generally regarded as more "conservative" than McCain did not seem as amenable to the report as the Arizonan was. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) and Jim Risch (R-Idaho), in a joint statement made late on December 8, called the release of the report a "partisan effort" by Democrats on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and asserted that the report is not "serious or constructive."

"We are concerned that this release could endanger the lives of Americans overseas, jeopardize U.S. relations with foreign partners, potentially incite violence, create political problems for our allies, and be used as a recruitment tool for our enemies," the senators said. "Simply put, this release is reckless and irresponsible."

In its official response to the release of the report, the CIA claimed that the interrogations helped to save lives. "The intelligence gained from the program was critical to our understanding of al Qaeda and continues to inform our counterterrorism efforts to this day," the agency said in a statement quoted by the BBC.

The CIA also maintained in a statement that the committee report "tells part of the story," but that "there are too many flaws for it to stand as the official record of the program."

The BBC also quoted an earlier statement from President Obama in response to the report, stating the CIA's methods used were inconsistent with American values. "These techniques did significant damage to America's standing in the world and made it harder to pursue our interests with allies and partners," said Obama.

In the report's foreword, Feinstein wrote:

I have attempted throughout to remember the impact on the nation and to the CIA workforce from the attacks of September 11, 2001. I can understand the CIA's impulse to consider the use of every possible tool to gather intelligence and remove terrorists from the battlefield, and CIA was encouraged by political leaders and the public to do whatever it could to prevent another attack.

The Intelligence Committee as well often pushes intelligence agencies to act quickly in response to threats and world events.

Nevertheless, such pressure, fear, and expectation of further terrorist plots do not justify, temper, or excuse improper actions taken by individuals or organizations in the name of national security. The major lesson of this report is that regardless of the pressures and the need to act, the Intelligence Community's actions must always reflect who we are as a nation, and adhere to our laws and standards.

A news story on the findings of the report in the *New York Times* culled descriptions of some of the more reprehensible CIA activities mentioned in the document, including detainees who were deprived



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of sleep for as long as a week, and some who were told that they would be killed while in U.S. custody. Perhaps the most inhumane action described was that, with the approval of the CIA's medical staff, some prisoners were subjected to medically unnecessary "rectal feeding" or "rectal hydration" (commonly known as enemas) — a technique that the CIA's chief of interrogations described as a way to exert "total control over the detainee."

Disagreement about the CIA's activities has been ongoing in the political realm. During the Republican presidential candidates' debate on November 12, 2011, there was a wide difference of opinion about whether waterboarding was ethical or not.

Both former Representative Ron Paul (R-Texas) and former Governor of Utah Jon Huntsman expressed opposition to waterboarding. "It's illegal under international law and under our law. It's also immoral, and it's also very impractical.... There's no evidence that you really get reliable evidence," Dr. Paul said. Huntsman said, "We diminish our standing in the world and the values that we project, which include liberty, democracy, human rights and open markets, when we torture."

Candidates Herman Cain and Representative Michele Bachmann (R-Minn.) said that they were in favor of using waterboarding. "I don't see it as torture. I see it as an enhanced interrogation technique," Cain said. Rep. Bachmann concurred with Cain, stating: "If I were president, I would be willing to use waterboarding. I think it was very effective. It gained information for our country ... and I also would like to say that today, under Barack Obama, he is allowing the ACLU to run the CIA."

In response to those statements, McCain tweeted that he was "Very disappointed by statements at SC GOP debate supporting waterboarding. Waterboarding is torture."

Those of the constitutionalist persuasion do not often agree with John McCain or Dianne Feinstein about much of anything. McCain is a committed neoconservative who is a hawk on intervening militarily overseas and who was part of the "Gang of Eight" that authored legislation granting amnesty to illegal immigrants. And Feinstein is a committed liberal who scored a measly five percent on *The New American's* last Freedom Index. But on the issue of condoning the CIA's use of "enhanced interrogation techniques" such as waterboarding, these senators at least have the honesty and humanity to call these actions what they are — torture.

Photo of Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) speaking to reporters: AP Images

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