



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on January 27, 2017

Trump Justifies Torture, Saying “It Works”

On Wednesday, President Donald Trump echoed a statement he made while on the campaign trail. In an interview with ABC News, he said that where terrorism is concerned, America needs to “fight fire with fire” and that he wants to bring back torture because it “works.”

President Trump’s remarks are no departure from any previous position on this issue. In November 2015 — when he was the leading Republican candidate — Trump made similar remarks in on *This Week With George Stephanopoulos*, saying he “would absolutely bring back interrogation and strong interrogation,” including [waterboarding](#). “You know, they don’t use waterboarding over there; they use chopping off people’s heads,” he said. “I would bring it back. I think waterboarding is peanuts compared to what they’d do to us.”



In Wednesday’s interview with ABC News, President Trump said essentially the same thing. Only now he’s not just a candidate; he is president of the United States. “When ISIS is doing things that no one has ever heard of, since medieval times, would I feel strongly about waterboarding?” Trump asked, adding, “As far as I’m concerned, we have to fight fire with fire.”

As *The New American* [reported](#) when candidate Trump made his previous remarks:

The use of waterboarding by U.S. interrogators first came to light in 2004 and immediately came under fire by those concerned about civil liberties. Over the next few years, the practice was discredited and banned by both presidents Bush and Obama. In November 2005, ABC News reported on waterboarding and other “enhanced interrogation” techniques. John Sifton of Human Rights Watch said, “The person believes they are being killed, and as such, it really amounts to a mock execution, which is illegal under international law.” Besides being illegal, waterboarding extracts worthless confessions. A prisoner who thinks he is being killed will say anything out of panic. Former CIA officer Bob Baer said it is “bad interrogation. I mean you can get anyone to confess to anything if the torture’s bad enough.”

This is not a new debate, either.

In 2011, during the early debates of the presidential primary cycle, Dr. Ron Paul said, “It’s really un-American to accept, on principle, that we will torture people that we capture.” As CNN [reported](#) at the time, many of the Republican candidates praised the practice of torture. Herman Cain, for instance, said of waterboarding, “I don’t see it as torture. I see it as an enhanced interrogation technique.” Michelle Bachman said it was “very effective” for getting information from prisoners and that it should



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be renewed. Apparently, both Cain and Bachman never took the time to study this issue. If they had, they might have come across the statement above by former CIA officer Bob Baer to the contrary. Or they might have realized that, as CNN reported:

The United States has also been historically inconsistent on this issue. Although the use of waterboarding was widespread in the aftermath of 9/11, in the aftermath of World War II the United States not only condemned but prosecuted and convicted a number of Japanese troops and officials for subjecting United States troops to waterboarding.

Or they might have read the letter Malcolm Wrightson Nance wrote to Chairman John Conyers and the members of the House Judiciary Committee that was published by *Salon* in November 2007. Nance is a former member of the U.S. military intelligence community and a retired U.S. Navy senior chief petty officer who “served honorably for 20 years.” In his letter he described the time he spent as an instructor at the U.S. Navy Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE) school in North Island Naval Air Station, California where he and other instructors taught students to resist “the techniques of brutal authoritarian enemies.” He described waterboarding as the “most severe of those [techniques] employed.” He wrote:

SERE trained tens of thousands of service members of its historical use by the Nazis, the Japanese, North Korea, Iraq, the Soviet Union, the Khmer Rouge and the North Vietnamese.

SERE emphasized that enemies of democracy and rule of law often ignore human rights, defy the Geneva Convention and have subjected our men and women to grievous physical and psychological harm. We stress that enduring these calumnies will allow our soldiers to return home with honor.

If it was a war crime for which the United States “prosecuted and convicted a number of Japanese troops and officials” after World War II, it is *still* a war crime. If it was — as SERE taught American soldiers — among the “most severe of those [techniques] employed” by “brutal authoritarian enemies” when it was practiced by “the Nazis, the Japanese, North Korea, Iraq, the Soviet Union, the Khmer Rouge and the North Vietnamese,” simply referring to it as “an enhanced interrogation technique” does nothing to change what it really is. Just because Americans are on the giving end doesn’t make it any less wrong.

Or any more effective.

In fact, President Trump has even less excuse for his ignorance of the total lack of effectiveness of torture than Cain and Bachman had in 2011. Because — as *The New American* [reported](#) in April 2016 — newer information dispels any remaining myth that torture is anything other than worthless as far as intelligence gathering goes. Echoing the sentiments of former CIA officer Bob Baer quoted above that torture is “bad interrogation” because “you can get anyone to confess to anything if the torture’s bad enough,” the report — based on the documents leaked by Private Bradley Manning and published by [WikiLeaks](#) in 2010 — [says that](#):

On February 23, 2016, almost a decade after his first promise to close it, President Obama began a final attempt to shut down the US military prison in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. His chances of success are moderate, not least since Republican presidential candidates and members of Congress immediately rejected the plan. Florida Senator Marco Rubio for instance stated that: “Not only are we not going to close Guantánamo, when I am president, if we capture a terrorist alive, they [...] are going to Guantánamo, and we are going to find out everything they know.”

This idea, compelling as it may sound to some, is unrealistic, as a new study based on leaked Joint



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Task Force Guantánamo (JTF-GTMO) documents reveals: although the large majority (85 percent) of Guantánamo detainees were explicitly brought to Cuba “to provide information,” almost two thirds did not reveal any information about fellow detainees whatsoever. Whether this was because they actually did not have any relevant information (which would mean that they were erroneously deported to Cuba) or because they managed to keep silent despite the application of torture (which would mean that the interrogation methods applied by JTF-GTMO were inefficient), one thing is clear: measured by what the US administration expected to learn from its prisoners, intelligence-gathering at Guantánamo was deficient.

As this writer said then:

The study “examines the behavior” of “765 detainees” and looks at the areas of “collaboration and disobedience and how [the behavior of the detainees in these areas] influences their chances of getting a release recommendation.” The findings are far from encouraging.

As Deutschmann (the author of the study) says in his analysis of the report:

For 84 percent of the detainees, the single explicit reason for transfer to Guantánamo was “to provide information.” About 7 percent of the detainees were brought to Guantánamo because of an alleged affiliation with Al-Qaeda or similar incriminating circumstances. In 2 percent of the cases, the reason was an alleged affiliation with Al-Qaeda and the provision of information. Only 12 detainees (less than 2 percent) were transported to Guantánamo “to face prosecution for terrorist activities against the US.”

With such a high percentage of detainees imprisoned at Guantánamo for the single purpose of providing information, it could reasonably be expected that such information could and would be obtained. Instead, the opposite is true. Perhaps the least surprising aspect of this is that torturing people may make them speak, but it will not make them speak the truth.

Instead, since “by revealing information, detainees don’t improve their own chances of getting release recommendations” but they do “impair [the chance of release] of the detainees they implicate,” most detainees simply make false claims against detainees from other nations with whom they do not share cultural, religious, or philosophical similarities. Those detainees repay the favor by making false accusations in return. The end result is a worthless pile of false data.

Deutschmann is far from alone in his analysis. As CNN reported, “In 2014, the US Senate Select Committee published a report on the CIA’s detention and interrogation program, offering a scathing analysis.” That 525-page report (which was merely a summary of a 6,700-page document) concluded that the “the use of the CIA’s enhanced interrogation techniques was not an effective means of obtaining accurate information or gaining detainee cooperation.”

The bottom line of both the study and the report is that torture does not work. Unless the objective is to gather useless information.

Ignoring all of that — or being ignorant of it — Trump told ABC News on Wednesday, “I’ve spoken as recently as twenty-four hours ago, with people at the highest level of intelligence, and I asked them the question, ‘Does it work? Does torture work?’ And the answer was, ‘Yes. Absolutely.’” One is left to wonder if these are the same “people at the highest level of intelligence” who signed off on not only the intelligence reports claiming that [the Kremlin was behind the embarrassing leaks which so embarrassed the DNC and Clinton campaign](#), but also elected to include [a spurious “dossier” alleging that Trump had — during visits to Moscow — engaged in bizarre and lurid sexual perversion with Russian prostitutes](#).



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More likely, the “people at the highest level of intelligence” to whom Trump referred were [the surveillance hawks he has appointed and nominated for top intelligence posts](#), since he mentioned one of them, CIA Director Mike Pompeo, by name. He told ABC News, “I want to do everything within the bounds of what you’re allowed to do legally,” adding, “But do I feel it works? Absolutely I feel it works.” He added that he would trust the judgment of CIA Director Mike Pompeo and Secretary of Defense General James Mattis. “I will rely on Pompeo and Mattis and my group. And if they don’t want to do [it], that’s fine.” Trump said. “And if they do want to do [it], I will work toward that end.”

Torture would be wrong even if it were “within the bounds of what you’re allowed to do legally,” but just to put in the for-what-it’s-worth column, it is not legal. Waterboarding and other forms of “enhanced interrogation techniques” (i.e., torture) being practiced by the U.S. government were banned by a law passed by Congress and signed by President Obama in 2015.

President Trump may have gotten off to a good start undoing some of Obama’s actions of the past eight years, but in this Obama was *right* and Trump is *wrong*. And since the Constitution gives all legislative power to Congress, he won’t be able to reverse this correct course of action with an executive order. Congress would have to vote to allow torture again. If that were to happen, President Trump may get his way.

If President Trump wants to keep his promise to “Make America Great Again!” he needs to leave torture on the ash heap of American history where it belongs — right beside slavery. In the words of a famous quote incorrectly attributed to Alexis de Tocqueville: “America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great.”

Photo: Prisoner held by U.S. military at Abu Ghraib



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