

Former CIA Director Calls Cheney “The Vice President of Torture”

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Former CIA chief Stansfield Turner lashed out at Dick Cheney on Thursday, calling him a “vice president for torture ” that is out of touch with the American people.

Turner’s condemnation, delivered during an interview with Britain’s ITV network, comes amid an effort by Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, to pass legislation forbidding any U.S. authority from torturing a prisoner. McCain was tortured as a Vietnam prisoner of war.

Cheney has lobbied against the legislation, prompting Turner to say he’s “embarrassed that the United State has a vice president for torture. I think it is just reprehensible.”

Turner, a retired Navy admiral who headed the intelligence agency from 1977 to 1981 under President Jimmy Carter, stood firm on his earlier remarks Friday and, in a CNN interview, scoffed at assertions that challenging the administration’s strategy aided the terrorists’ propaganda efforts.

“It’s the vice president who is out there advocating torture. He’s the one who has made himself the vice president in favor of torture, ” said Turner, who from 1972 to 1974 was president of the Naval War College, a think tank for strategic and national security policy.

Cheney has fought McCain’s legislation, pushing for an exception for the CIA in cases that involve a prisoner who may have knowledge of an imminent attack.

Torture diminishes the country’s image and moral stature, forcing other nations to look at the United States “in a very different light,” Turner said, adding that such tactics also open the door to retribution.

“We military people don’t want future military people who are taken prisoner by other countries to be subjected to torture in the name of doing just what the United States does,” he said.

Turner, who supported Sen. John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election, went on to say that “the vice president is out of tune with the American people, who don’t want our country tarred with the label of being one that tortures. ”

A statement from the vice president’s office said that the United States “does not torture. ” It also stated that Cheney’s views are “reflected in the administration’s policy.

"Our country is at war, and our government has an obligation to protect the American people from a brutal enemy that has declared war upon us."

The United States has enacted several intrusive procedures since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks to protect the country from terrorists, but torture, Turner said, is an unacceptable method.

"Torture is beyond the pale. It is going too far," he said.

CCN Interview with Admiral Stansfield Turner

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Up next, its a stinging charge. A former CIA director calls Vice President Cheney, and I'm quoting now, "the vice president for torture. " I'll ask military veteran Admiral Stansfield Turner what he means by this as he debates a former U.S. Army green beret just after the break.

BLITZER: Welcome back to THE SITUATION ROOM. A former CIA chief is leveling a very powerful charge at the vice president of the United States, Dick Cheney, in response to Cheney's lobbying against the proposed to ban any torture of prisoners. Listen to what Admiral Stansfield Turner said in an interview with Britain's ITV Network.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

ADM. STANSFIELD TURNER (RET.), FORMER CIA DIRECTOR: I'm embarrassed, I'm embarrassed, that the United States has a vice president for torture. I think it is just reprehensible.

(END VIDEO CLIP) BLITZER: Vice President Cheney's office flatly rejects that charge and repeats the president's statement that the United States does not torture. Joining us now is Admiral Stansfield Turner, the former CIA director in the Carter administration. He's the author of a new book on the relationship between the president and the CIA. Also with us, Bob Belavacqua. He's a former U.S. Army green beret. Gentlemen, thanks very much for joining us.

All right, what do you mean that the vice is the vice president of torture?

TURNER: The president says we do not torture. Senator McCain has proposed a law that would prohibit our doing torture. The vice president opposes that law. The vice president must be in favor of torture.

BLITZER: The law that McCain has introduced, Bob, was passed 90-9 in the U.S. Senate. And it basically said CIA personnel should be bound by the same restrictions, the same guidelines, as military personnel. What's wrong with that?

MAJ. BOB BELAVACQUA (RET.), U.S. ARMY: Absolutely nothing, Wolf. I actually agree with it. My point is that we're currently not torturing people within the Department of Defense.

BLITZER: Within the Department of Defense. What about the CIA? What about civilians?

BELAVACQUA: If the vice president is going to be the advocate for torture, the apparatus he

will use will not be the Department of Defense. The CIA, due to the nature of the way they operate, very clandestine in different locations, it's very hard to do quality assurance quality control.

BLITZER: You ran the CIA. Does the CIA engage in torture?

TURNER: It did not in my time, it did before my time. One of the problems that I inherited was a Soviet defector named Nosenko (ph) whom the CIA had tortured for three and a half years, in effect, by locking him up in a small cell and giving psychological torture. So it's a problem. If the CIA gets involved in this again, it will tarnish the CIA's reputation, as it did with Nosenko many years ago.

BLITZER: The allegation, Bob, is that there's one set of rules for the U.S. military, and the army has these guidelines in the field manual, there's another set of rules for civilian government personnel like those in the CIA, and perhaps a third set of rule for civilian defense contractors, not military, sort of in this shady. Is that a fair argument, that there should be three separate sets rules?

BELAVACQUA: Absolutely not. And I don't know how much of a debate you're going to get between the two of us, but torture is torture. And it's not so much what it does to the agency. The admiral referred to the bad reflection on the CIA. It kills us public relations-wide across the globe. Abu Ghraib, we're still trying to recover from that. I don't care who's conducting it, what contract vehicle they're on, it's torture, and it should be not be allowed.

BLITZER: The vice president, the president says the United States does not torture. What evidence, admiral, do you have to the contrary?

TURNER: I don't have evidence that we are torturing.

BLITZER: But you accused the vice president of being the vice president of torture.

TURNER: He's an advocate for torturing.

BLITZER: He says he doesn't torture.

TURNER: Well, he says he won't support the McCain bill, which would outlaw this. Why would he do that unless he wanted to torture?

BLITZER: Well, because the McCain, I suppose — and this is only what the administration has been saying, I interviewed the president's national security advisor the other day, is that the Congress should not be in a position to rule out certain measures that, in case of extreme circumstances, the president might have to sign off on.

TURNER: All those big words say that they want the CIA to be able to torture, as far as I interpret them.

BLITZER: Do you see no occasion whatsoever, even very remote, that torture might be applicable?

TURNER: I see none that we should considering torturing, yes.

BLITZER: What about you? Is there ever a time when it might be in the national interest to

use torture?

BELAVACQUA: Wolf, if somebody was headed to Washington, D.C., and had a nuclear weapon or a nuclear device in their control and we had an individual that had information that could stop the attack, I would do everything physically humanly possible to get information out of him to stop that attack. That is an extreme situation.

BLITZER: It's an extreme situation, but Stephen Hadley, the president's national security advisor, last Sunday on CNN's "Late Edition" said to me, "What if we had captured one of those hijackers on September 7th, and we got indication that something big was about to happen?" What would you do in a situation like that if you were running the CIA?

TURNER: You would interrogate him in all reasonable ways that you could. And if you slipped over into torture, that's one thing. But to advertise that we torture, to make that a policy of the United States government, has far more problems than it does benefits.

BLITZER: So under that remote circumstance, there would be an opportunity to use these extreme measures, water boarding, or sleep deprivation, all these other thing that some are saying would be cruel and unusual punishment?

TURNER: It would certainly be there. And if the individual had this real sense that doing that would make a tremendous difference, like no 9/11, then the individual would do it.

BLITZER: In other words, I'm hearing you, correct me if I'm wrong, admiral, that under that rare circumstance, you are, in effect, justifying torture?

TURNER: I think that rare circumstance is so hypothetical that I'm not concerned about that. But I do say that we cannot endorse, as a nation, a policy of we will torture. I'm a military man. Senator McCain was a military man. He was a man who was tortured. He's now proposing this bill to outlaw our torturing. I certainly agree with him because all other military people are vulnerable to being tortured if we advocate it.

BLITZER: You think that legislation should be passed?

BELAVACQUA: I do, Wolf. First, I would like to see a universal definition of torture. What does it look like, and where are we going to set the parameters up? You have got to do a stiff interrogation on an individual, otherwise it's a job interview. And that's what we are doing right now, we're doing job interviews.

BLITZER: Bob Belavacqua, thanks very much joining us. Stansfield Turner, thanks to you as well. Appreciate it.

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