

Poison Pen

Torture against prisoners captured in Bush's "war on terror"

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According to agents of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, President George W. Bush has signed a secret executive order approving the use of torture against prisoners captured in his "war on terror" — including thousands of innocent people rounded up in Iraq and crammed into Saddam Hussein's infamous Abu Ghraib prison.

FBI documents, obtained in a lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union and reported this week in the Los Angeles Times, detailed the agents' "disgust" at the "aggressive and improper" methods used by military interrogators and civilian contractors against prisoners, and the widespread, ongoing pattern of "serious physical abuses" they found at the American concentration camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and in Iraq.

Most of the offences occurred long after the initial public scandal over "a few bad apples" at Abu Ghraib. For example, in June 2004, an FBI agent informed top officials in Washington that he had witnessed such torture techniques as "strangulation, beatings, [and] placement of lit cigarettes into the detainees' ear openings." The agent added that military officials "were engaged in a coverup of these abuses."

Also in June, the FBI reported that a prisoner in Abu Ghraib was cuffed, trussed up in a "stress position," then "doused with cold water, dropped onto barbed wire, dragged by his feet and punched in the stomach."

In August 2004, the date of the latest reports, an FBI agent reported that detainees in the Guantanamo concentration camp were often kept chained in "stress positions" on the floor, "with no chair, food or water. Most of the times they had urinated or defecated on themselves and had been left for 18-24 hours or more." One detainee was found "almost unconscious on the floor, with a pile of hair next to him," said the agent. "He had apparently been literally pulling his own hair out throughout the night."

The Guantanamo abuses occurred in front of FBI witnesses at what is considered the showcase of the new worldwide prison system Bush has established to process his captives in the "terror war." But there are a number of "secret prisons" — including a special enclosed facility at Guantanamo itself — where "special" interrogations are carried out by the CIA without any outside witnesses, The Washington Post reports. By presidential order, the CIA does not have to say who these prisoners are, how or why or where they were taken prisoner, or what happens to them behind the impenetrable walls.

According to the official documents, FBI agents said that military interrogators and their corporate mercenaries in Guantanamo and Iraq routinely went "far beyond the restrictions

of the Geneva Conventions prohibiting torture,” but were acting under an executive order signed by Bush authorizing the use of dogs and other aggressive physical and psychological techniques on prisoners.

Bush officials denied such an executive order exists; they say the agents confused it with an earlier order for “aggressive techniques” issued by Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld, which was then supposedly rescinded and softened in March 2003 after complaints from military lawyers. But the abuses described in the new FBI memos occurred long after the first Rumsfeld order was invalidated. Thus the Administration’s denial is based on a clear falsehood.

What’s more, the FBI papers state repeatedly and unequivocally that Bush himself had authorized the aggressive techniques. They also note that in May 2004, after the scandal at Abu Ghraib, Bush had specified that “certain techniques can only be used if very high-level authority is granted.” Thus some of the most disturbing abuses — actions which the interrogators nonetheless felt comfortable enough to commit in front of FBI agents — have been carried out with direct White House or Pentagon approval.

Earlier this year, a cache of White House memos was uncovered revealing a systematic effort to provide “legal” underpinning for the abrogation of the Geneva Conventions on treatment of prisoners and support for a deliberate policy of disregarding U.S. laws forbidding torture, kidnapping, assassination and indefinite detention, The Washington Post (and many others) report. These memos also claimed an unprecedented extension of presidential powers, arguing that the “Commander-in-Chief” cannot be constrained by any law whatsoever in the prosecution of a war. One main goal of this legal analysis, the memos admitted, was to help Bush and his top officials avoid prosecution for war crimes, since the actions being recommended by Bush and the Pentagon were clearly criminal under international and U.S. law.

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When the memos surfaced, the White House declared that the Bush Administration would never do anything illegal. However, they never directly repudiated the memos — which, after all, argue that nothing a president orders in wartime, including torture, is actually illegal. As the documentation of prisoner abuse grows larger and larger with each passing month, it is obvious that such a system of widespread — and ongoing — atrocities could not be sustained without approval at the very highest levels.

Now FBI agents, in official reports, have traced the responsibility for these crimes directly to the pen of George W. Bush. Despite the patently false White House denials, the torture directive cited by the FBI not only echoes the legal briefs cited above, it also perfectly complements Bush’s earlier executive orders allowing the secret execution of anyone on earth, including American citizens, whom Bush or his designated agents arbitrarily declares a “terrorist” — without charges, evidence or trial. These orders were first reported in November 2001 by The Washington Post and have been repeatedly confirmed by

Administration officials.

The evidence is credible, compelling and abundant. The lines of authority are clear. The blood of the tortured is on Bush's hands.

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