

Torture Is Foreplay for War

By [David Swanson](#)

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

When did recent U.S. torture begin on a major scale? When September 11, 2001, provided a weak excuse to attack Iraq, an excuse that would need some bolstering. When did Bybee send the CIA a recipe for torturing Abu Zubaydah? A week after the Downing Street meeting. When did our government waterboard Khalid Sheikh Mohammed 183 times? The same month the bombs destroyed Baghdad. When did the intense torturing of key figures stop, although the routine torturing of thousands of people continued? As soon as the war on Iraq was underway.

What was al Libi tortured to compel him to falsely agree with? The Bush-Cheney justifications for war. Why were Zubaydah and Mohammed tortured so far beyond what even Dick Cheney could conceivably have fantasized was an attempt to obtain true information? Because the goal was false information, the overriding mission was to lie us into war, and the death and destruction wrought in that war would make even the murder of a small number of people through torture all but unnoticeable except to audiences kept miraculously ignorant of the horrors of the war.

But why not stick with bribery, forgery, reliance on drunk informants, and simply pulling flabbergastingly audacious claims straight out of your ass? Why TORTURE people in order to support war lies? Because the central lie was not that Saddam Hussein's government had worked with its opponents or mass-produced invisible weapons or developed magical powers. The central lie was that a subhuman species of monster was roaming the earth, dark-skinned, Muslim, foreign, Arab, terrorist, and evil, the sort of creature who would only answer to brute force and who would have to be dealt with outside the constraints of law. Some Americans may have accepted torture and other criminality because they believed in the evil of such creatures, but many Americans no doubt believed more strongly in the evil of such creatures precisely because the beasts were tortured, as of course no one would be who didn't need to be.

What's the one topic that was prevalent in the Democratic congressional minority in 2005-2006 that vanished once the Democrats won a majority? War lies. And how do war lies differ from torture? We're supposed to pretend the torture is ending quickly and we're supposed to pretend the wars are ending slowly. Yes, but what's the more important difference? Torture is cruel and criminal. It's morally reprehensible and it hurts people. War, on the other hand, is just part of our world, like air and water. A war can be wise or mistaken, efficient or mismanaged. But it's not criminal or sadistic or shocking. And even the worst war must be funded, fireworks lit, music played, and choruses of "support duh troops" sung.

Team Obama is working hard to move torture into the category of war. Torture, to these people, is not a crime but a policy choice. From now on the president will torture only if he

really really needs to, and those who tortured for less acceptable reasons will not be punished, since prosecuting crimes would constitute the politicization of policy differences. This means that torturers will face no penalties, and so they are continuing to torture as they see fit. The war in Iraq is ongoing, and the war in Afghanistan is being dramatically escalated. Strikes into Pakistan have become routine. The military budget is going up yet again. And astroturf groups that “oppose” wars when they bear the Republican label have turned against torture as the ultimate crime, even these many years behind the times using words like “prosecute” and “impeach”, while happily accepting the continuation and escalation of wars, wars justified by the existence of an enemy defined by torture.

At Nuremberg, where we prosecuted from the top down, including the lawyers, and where we claimed to be setting a standard for our own future crimes, not imposing victors’ justice, we called aggressive war “the supreme international crime, differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.” And what has it contained this time? Misleading congress, defrauding congress, mispending funds, use of illegal weapons that melt the skin off children or poison them in the womb, targeting of civilians and journalists and hospitals, murder, assassinations, warrantless spying, lawless detention, imprisonment of children, torture, domestic propaganda, violations of the Hatch Act and the Voting Rights Act, obstruction of justice, misprision of felony, selected exposure of classified information, retaliation against whistleblowers, domestic use of the military, and the hornswoggling of half a country into debating the wisdom of enforcing laws against torture, as if this were a political question to be decided by its likely impact on each of two sports teams. The whole of this aggressive war has contained lies to the public, the secret establishment of government policy by closed-door meetings of oil barons, immunity for mercenaries, war profiteering without limit, secret laws, royal decrees, laws rewritten with signing statements, the undermining of preparedness for natural disasters, the exacerbation of climate change, the destruction of an economy through military waste and Wall Street theft and the transfer of wealth upward, and the complete politicization of the Justice Department.

We’ve been hiring, firing, prosecuting, and exonerating based on political loyalties. We’ve put people in prison for the crime of being a Democrat. And now we are told that enforcing laws against torture would involve “politicizing” our justice system. Why? Because there are people still claiming that a nonexistent plot to blow up a building in Los Angeles, which was discovered before it had been planned, was later foiled by torturing an evildoer whose valuable information, obtained only through torture, was transported backward through time and used to protect us from a plot that seems worse now because he was tortured. And because the orders to torture came from POLITICIANS: the former president and vice president. And because the torture was part of the sales-pitch for the wars. And because the current president wants to maintain the power to torture and pass that power along to future presidents. And because the current president wants to continue the wars and at all costs expand the empire.

Meanwhile nothing creates more backlash against U.S. imperialism than torture. A future act of terrorism in the United States would more than likely be motivated by U.S. torture and almost certainly by U.S. wars of aggression. And yet the story has already been rehearsed for endless repetition that such an act would again not be a crime but an act of war, and an act of war facilitated by a failure to torture enough people, forgetting that the torture marathons of the supposed key enemies stopped once the war was started, forgetting that Bush, like Obama, claimed endlessly that the United States was not torturing, and forgetting

that the latest torture memos only shock us because we already knew about the actual acts of torture that they so coolly sanction. Ceasing what the FBI and the US military call a recruiting tool for anti-U.S. terrorism is now too dangerous because the handful of corporations that control domestic communications have agreed to claim that future terrorism will have resulted from ceasing to use the recruiting tool.

And yet, if the media corporations are allowed to decide that up is down, and the CIA is allowed to declare itself above the law, and the prosecution of politicians is deemed unacceptably political (at least if they're Republicans), and if the notion that the 110th Congress gave a rat's ass about any of its feeble attempts to restrain presidential power is allowed to go the way of the pretense that Nuremberg was intended to establish international law, then we will see a dramatic increase in violence in Iraq and Afghanistan and a terrible worsening of relations between our nation and the rest of the world. We will see the increased commission of crimes far worse than torture by our nation and others, as the dream of international standards of decency is ground into the dust by Dick Cheney's slowly departing wheelchair, propelled by the gentle hands of Barack Obama.

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***David Swanson** is the author of the upcoming book "Daybreak: Undoing the Imperial Presidency and Forming a More Perfect Union" by Seven Stories Press and of the introduction to "The 35 Articles of Impeachment and the Case for Prosecuting George W. Bush" published by Feral House and available at Amazon.com. Swanson holds a master's degree in philosophy from the University of Virginia. He has worked as a newspaper reporter and as a communications director, with jobs including press secretary for Dennis Kucinich's 2004 presidential campaign, media coordinator for the International Labor Communications Association, and three years as communications coordinator for ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. Swanson is Co-Founder of AfterDowningStreet.org, creator of ProsecuteBushCheney.org and Washington Director of Democrats.com, a board member of Progressive Democrats of America, the Backbone Campaign, and Voters for Peace, a convenor of the legislative working group of United for Peace and Justice, and chair of the accountability and prosecution working group of United for Peace and Justice.*

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