

Torture: Top Bush Advisors Approved ‘Enhanced Interrogation’

Detailed Discussions Were Held About Techniques to Use on al Qaeda Suspects

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In dozens of top-secret talks and meetings in the White House, the most senior Bush administration officials discussed and approved specific details of how high-value al Qaeda suspects would be interrogated by the Central Intelligence Agency, sources tell ABC News.

The so-called Principals who participated in the meetings also approved the use of “combined” interrogation techniques — using different techniques during interrogations, instead of using one method at a time — on terrorist suspects who proved difficult to break, sources said.

Highly placed sources said a handful of top advisers signed off on how the CIA would interrogate top al Qaeda suspects — whether they would be slapped, pushed, deprived of sleep or subjected to simulated drowning, called waterboarding.

The high-level discussions about these “enhanced interrogation techniques” were so detailed, these sources said, some of the interrogation sessions were almost choreographed — down to the number of times CIA agents could use a specific tactic.

The advisers were members of the National Security Council’s Principals Committee, a select group of senior officials who met frequently to advise President Bush on issues of national security policy.

At the time, the Principals Committee included Vice President Cheney, former National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Colin Powell, as well as CIA Director George Tenet and Attorney General John Ashcroft.

As the national security adviser, Rice chaired the meetings, which took place in the White House Situation Room and were typically attended by most of the principals or their deputies.

Contacted by ABC News today, spokesmen for Tenet, Rumsfeld and Powell declined to comment about the interrogation program or their private discussions in Principals

Meetings. Powell said through an assistant there were “hundreds of [Principals] meetings” on a wide variety of topics and that he was “not at liberty to discuss private meetings.”

The White House also declined comment on behalf of Rice and Cheney. Ashcroft could not be reached for comment today.

Critics at home and abroad have harshly criticized the interrogation program, which pushed the limits of international law and, they say, condoned torture. Bush and his top aides have consistently defended the program. They say it is legal and did not constitute torture.

“I can say that questioning the detainees in this program has given us the information that has saved innocent lives by helping us stop new attacks here in the United States and across the world,” Bush said in a speech in September 2006.

In interview with ABC’s Charles Gibson last year, Tenet said: “It was authorized. It was legal, according to the Attorney General of the United States.”

But this is the first time sources have disclosed that a handful of the most senior advisers in the White House explicitly approved the details of the program. According to multiple sources, it was members of the Principals Committee that not only discussed specific plans and specific interrogation methods, but approved them.

The discussions and meetings occurred in an atmosphere of great concern that another terror attack on the nation was imminent. Sources said the extraordinary involvement of the senior advisers in the grim details of exactly how individual interrogations would be conducted showed how seriously officials took the al Qaeda threat.

It started after the CIA captured top al Qaeda operative Abu Zubaydah in spring 2002 in Faisalabad, Pakistan. When his safe house was raided by Pakistani security forces along with FBI and CIA agents, Zubaydah was shot three times during the gun battle.

At a time when virtually all counterterrorist professionals viewed another attack as imminent — and with information on al Qaeda scarce — the detention of Zubaydah was seen as a potentially critical breakthrough.

Zubaydah was taken to the local hospital, where CIA agent John Kiriakou, who helped coordinate Zubaydah’s capture, was ordered to remain at the wounded captive’s side at all times. “I ripped up a sheet and tied him to the bed,” Kiriakou said.

But after Zubaydah recovered from his wounds at a secret CIA prison in Thailand, he was uncooperative.

“I told him I had heard he was being a jerk,” Kiriakou recalled. “I said, ‘These guys can make it easy on you or they can make it hard.’ It was after that he became defiant.”

The CIA wanted to use more aggressive — and physical — methods to get information.

The agency briefed high-level officials in the National Security Council’s Principals Committee, led by then-National Security Advisor Rice and including then-Attorney General Ashcroft, which then signed off on the plan, sources said. It is unclear whether anyone on the committee objected to the CIA’s plans for Zubaydah.

The CIA has confirmed Zubaydah was one of three al Qaeda suspects subjected to waterboarding.

After he was waterboarded, officials say Zubaydah gave up valuable information that led to the capture of 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheik Mohammad and fellow 9/11 plotter Ramzi bin al-Shibh.

Mohammad was also subjected to waterboarding by the CIA. At a hearing before a military tribunal at Guantanamo Bay on March 10, 2007, KSM, as he is known, said he broke under the harsh interrogation.

COURT: Were any statements you made as the result of any of the treatment that you received during that time frame from 2003 to 2006? Did you make those statements because of the treatment you receive from these people?

KSM: Statement for whom?

COURT: To any of these interrogators.

KSM: CIA peoples. Yes. At the beginning, when they transferred me...

Lawyers in the Justice Department had written a classified memo, which was extensively reviewed, that gave formal legal authority to government interrogators to use the “enhanced” questioning tactics on suspected terrorist prisoners. The August 2002 memo, signed by then head of the Office of Legal Counsel Jay Bybee, was referred to as the so-called “Golden Shield” for CIA agents, who worried they would be held liable if the harsh interrogations became public.

Old hands in the intelligence community remembered vividly how past covert operations, from the Vietnam War-era “Phoenix Program” of assassinations of Viet Cong to the Iran-Contra arms sales of the 1980s were painted as the work of a “rogue agency” out of control.

But even after the “Golden Shield” was in place, briefings and meetings in the White House to discuss individual interrogations continued, sources said. Tenet, seeking to protect his agents, regularly sought confirmation from the NSC principals that specific interrogation plans were legal.

According to a former CIA official involved in the process, CIA headquarters would receive cables from operatives in the field asking for authorization for specific techniques. Agents, worried about overstepping their boundaries, would await guidance in particularly complicated cases dealing with high-value detainees, two CIA sources said.

Highly placed sources said CIA directors Tenet and later Porter Goss along with agency lawyers briefed senior advisers, including Cheney, Rice, Rumsfeld and Powell, about detainees in CIA custody overseas.

“It kept coming up. CIA wanted us to sign off on each one every time,” said one high-ranking official who asked not to be identified. “They’d say, ‘We’ve got so and so. This is the plan.’”

Sources said that at each discussion, all the Principals present approved.

“These discussions weren’t adding value,” a source said. “Once you make a policy decision

to go beyond what you used to do and conclude it's legal, (you should) just tell them to implement it."

Then-Attorney General Ashcroft was troubled by the discussions. He agreed with the general policy decision to allow aggressive tactics and had repeatedly advised that they were legal. But he argued that senior White House advisers should not be involved in the grim details of interrogations, sources said.

According to a top official, Ashcroft asked aloud after one meeting: "Why are we talking about this in the White House? History will not judge this kindly."

The Principals also approved interrogations that combined different methods, pushing the limits of international law and even the Justice Department's own legal approval in the 2002 memo, sources told ABC News.

At one meeting in the summer of 2003 — attended by Vice President Cheney, among others — Tenet made an elaborate presentation for approval to combine several different techniques during interrogations, instead of using one method at a time, according to a highly placed administration source.

A year later, amidst the outcry over unrelated abuses of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, the controversial 2002 legal memo, which gave formal legal authorization for the CIA interrogation program of the top al Qaeda suspects, leaked to the press. A new senior official in the Justice Department, Jack Goldsmith, withdrew the legal memo — the Golden Shield — that authorized the program.

But the CIA had captured a new al Qaeda suspect in Asia. Sources said CIA officials that summer returned to the Principals Committee for approval to continue using certain "enhanced interrogation techniques."

Then-National Security Advisor Rice, sources said, was decisive. Despite growing policy concerns — shared by Powell — that the program was harming the image of the United States abroad, sources say she did not back down, telling the CIA: "This is your baby. Go do it."

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