

Is Obama continuing Bush-Cheney torture?

By: Nat Hentoff – May 8, 2013

Many Americans, including some of Barack Obama's critics, take his word that his administration opposes torture. With fanfare, two days after occupying the Oval Office, he issued Executive Order 13491, commanding the CIA to close its secret prisons while also declaring that no detainee in U.S. custody could be subject to any form of interrogation not found in the Army Field Manual, thereby excluding torture.

Noting this, the nonpartisan Constitution Project's 577-page April 16 report, "Detainee Treatment," which I wrote about last week, scrupulously documents the range and depth of this nation's torture policies, and has a separate substantial chapter covering our current president. "The Obama Administration" exposes the factual torture record of our re-elected leader.

For example, George W. Bush approved "renditions," which the CIA vigorously implemented. This occurred when terrorism suspects were kidnapped by the CIA — often from the streets of their nations — and sent to countries known for torturing their prisoners.

But the Constitution Project's report reminds us that renditions have continued under Obama — in utter secrecy, of course. We don't know who gets snatched and why and for how long. Neither do their families.

Of course, the receiving countries must first assure Obama officials that these suspects won't be tortured. That's exactly what Bush's ultra-loyal Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice used to tell Americans and the rest of the world — without ever following up on the renditions' ghost prisoners.

As for those CIA secret prisons, the Constitution Project cites a 2011 Nation magazine article in its report:

"Jeremy Scahill wrote that the CIA was interrogating Al Qaeda-affiliated prisoners in 'a secret prison buried in the basement of Somalia's National Security Agency (NSA) headquarters, where prisoners suspected of being Shabab members or of having links to the group are held. Some of the prisoners have been snatched off the streets of Kenya and rendered by plane to Mogadishu. While the underground prison is officially run by the Somali NSA, U.S. intelligence personnel (the CIA) pay the salaries of intelligence agents and also directly interrogate prisoners.'"

How? By torturing them? Well, if President Obama ever has to testify before an independent American commission on torture, he might refer to this portion of Scahill's story in the Constitution Project's report: "Former detainees (in the Somali prison) did not allege that they were beaten or physically tortured, but did describe being held for extended periods without counsel, in squalid conditions.

“Somali intelligence officials and former detainees told Scahill that Americans conducted interrogations at the prison.”

Were these interrogations conducted under the CIA’s version of American rule of law, Mr. President?

“Even more troubling,” reports the Constitution Project, “is the evidence that Afghan detainees have been tortured after U.S. forces turned them over to the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS).”

The Constitution Project cites a 2011 report from the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). According to the report:

“Torture was especially pervasive in Department 124, the NDS’s facility for ‘high-value detainees’ in Kabul. Of 28 former detainees at Department 124, 26 told UNAMA they had been tortured by methods such as ‘beating, suspension, and twisting and wrenching of genitals.’ Seventeen of those 26 had been captured by coalition forces. Five of the 26 were children.”

Hear that, President Obama? And dig this, sir: “According to The Washington Post, Department 124 is across the street from the United States’ military headquarters in Kabul and was built with U.S. funds.”

Torture sites paid for by your and my taxes.

Finally, in July 2011, the U.S. did ban prisoner transfers to the NDS in Kandahar. But, according to the Constitution Project, “there was evidence that the military’s restrictions on transfers were not being applied to transfers by the CIA,” which has a privileged place in Obama’s soul.

Here’s what one person transferred by the CIA told the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, as related by the Constitution Project: “I was severely beaten by cable in the head and neck. I was shackled and they connected the shackles to an electrical current and shocked me until I was unconscious. They also beat me on the back and waist very hard ... Even my tongue is severely damaged from the electric shock.”

This may help you understand why the “liberating” United States is so detested in Afghanistan.

Propelled by the Constitution Project’s “Detainee Treatment” task force, the website ThinkProgress.org recently reported that “pressure is mounting on the Obama administration to allow access to documents pertaining to the CIA’s post 9/11 terror suspect detention program and to order a full accounting of the Bush-era torture program” (“National Security Brief: Pressure Mounts On Obama To Investigate Torture,” thinkprogress.org, April 17).

But access to Bush-era documents isn’t enough. The administration’s continuing torture program, as reported by the Constitution Project, must be included.

“As long as the debate continues,” the Constitution Project stresses, “so too does the possibility that the United States could again engage in torture.”

And not only by this administration.

But this debate must center on actual, due process accountability for the torturers — not only named CIA torturers, but also those in our military and, of course, those in the executive branch from whom the ultimate directive came.

Accountability must also come to those members of the Bush and Obama administrations who abetted torture through legal means, argues ThinkProgress.org, citing Thomas Pickering’s recent op-ed in The Washington Post: “The Obama administration should declassify all relevant documents as soon as possible and work with Congress to ‘close the loopholes that allowed torture to occur under a pretense of legality.’”

If we don’t have this debate, what are we saying to our future generations — and to our future administrations, whatever they may decide to do without telling us?