



Fact-checking Todd Wilcox's claim that waterboarding works

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U.S. Senate candidate Todd Wilcox said the controversial interrogation practice of waterboarding isn't torture but an effective tool in the global war on terror.

It gets results, he said.

In an interview published in the *Miami Herald* on May 20, Wilcox blamed the White House for limiting the country's ability to gain intelligence from alleged terrorists.

"I can tell you that the enhanced interrogation techniques that have since been banned by this administration — specifically waterboarding — work," said Wilcox, who is vying for the Republican nomination to replace Sen. Marco Rubio. "They work on the terrorists, and there's a proven history of that."

We wanted to know if waterboarding — strapping a prisoner to a board or table and then pouring water over a cloth covering their mouth and nose to simulate drowning — was a proven method of questioning someone.

Waterboarding was one of the "enhanced interrogation techniques" used on terrorism suspects by American interrogators in the years after the Sept. 11 attacks. President Barack Obama banned the practice by executive order in 2009.

Wilcox, an Orlando defense contractor, noted to PolitiFact Florida through his spokeswoman that some high-ranking officials including former Vice President Dick Cheney, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and former CIA Director Leon Panetta credited waterboarding for producing valuable intelligence.

The former Green Beret and CIA officer told the *Herald* that he has "access to a lot of information that the rest of the public may not know" from which to draw his conclusion.

Wilcox didn't elaborate, but his declarations are lacking real evidence, either historically or in the recent past, experts told us.

Waterboarding has long been considered a poor way to extract information, Reed College political science professor Darius Rejali said. Only a handful of case studies about waterboarding's effects are available.

Those examples involved Nazi Germany's Gestapo in Norway and France; the French in Vietnam and Algeria; and the United States in the Philippines at the turn of the last century. In each case, the benefits of waterboarding were suspect at best, Rejali said.

To start with, interrogators aren't in a position to know whether a prisoner is divulging anything factual, Rejali said. They think they have the training and can tell what's the truth, but they can't. The prisoner, meanwhile, is likely willing to say anything to make the interrogation stop.

One of the most prominent examples of waterboarding's alleged success is that of Abu Zubaydah, whom the Bush administration had initially considered al-Qaida's chief of operations. Zubaydah was waterboarded 83 times, among being subjected to other techniques, and confessed to planned attacks on shopping malls, nuclear power plants and the Brooklyn Bridge.

But Zubaydah was mentally ill and had actually been in charge of scheduling people to move in and out of al-Qaida training camps after joining the group following 9/11. Much of the information he supplied was unreliable, but also provided before he was waterboarded.

The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence examined the CIA's program when Democrats controlled the Senate. Their final report, about 6,700 pages long and approved in 2012, remains classified. A 525-page redacted executive summary was released in December 2014, followed by a minority report from the committee's Republicans and a CIA response.

The summary said that enhanced interrogation techniques like waterboarding were not effective for getting intelligence from people detained after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The committee examined 20 prominent cases (including Zubaydah's) that reportedly "saved lives," according to the CIA and the Bush administration. Some of these cases specifically cited waterboarding as a tactic used, but the committee concluded that in each example, either key information was gathered before enhanced interrogation began, the information was already available prior to interrogation, or the interrogation had nothing to do with the information obtained.

Rejali pointed out most officials defending waterboarding were people whose jobs were at stake over the practice. Patrick Eddington, a former CIA analyst now at the libertarian Cato Institute, said the Senate investigation showed the agency was aware waterboarding and other techniques could potentially be considered torture.

Trinity College Dublin's Shane O'Mara, a professor of experimental brain research, told *Newsweek* there is scientific evidence that waterboarding physically prevents a person from providing reliable information.

The sensation of suffocating activates survival instincts, not memory recall, O'Mara told the magazine.

Wilcox didn't provide concrete proof and experts say virtually none exists. We rate the statement False.