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Waterboarding and other 'Decision Points' in Bush's war on terror

Former President George W. Bush has returned to political life with today's release of his new memoir, 'Decision Points.' Controversial decisions during his tenure as commander-in-chief have also returned to public scrutiny, with the 43rd president talking openly in interviews this week about his choice to approve waterboarding and other questionable acts in the war on terror.



Former President George W. Bush signs a copy of his book 'Decision Points' at a store near his Dallas home, on Nov. 9. (LM Otero/AP)

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#5 Waterboarding



Protesters demonstrate the use of waterboarding to volunteer Maboud Ebrahim Zadeh, on Nov. 5, 2007, in front of the Justice Department in Washington.

(Manuel Balce Ceneta/AP/File)

The United States has not employed waterboarding since 2003, though George W. Bush's decision to allow the controversial,

and arguably illegal, tactic has continued to draw criticism and scrutiny.

According to interrogation memos uncovered in 2009, Al Qaeda operative Abu Zubaydah was subjected to waterboarding 83 times in Aug. 2002, and 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohamed was subjected to waterboarding 183 times in March 2003.

In his new memoir, Mr. Bush defends the use of waterboarding: "At my direction, Department of Justice and CIA lawyers conducted a careful legal review. The enhanced interrogation program complied with the Constitution and all applicable laws, including those that ban torture.

"There were two that I felt went too far, even if they were legal. I directed the CIA not to use them. Another technique was waterboarding, a process of simulated drowning. No doubt the procedure was tough, but medical experts assured the CIA that it did no lasting harm."

Bush writes that he has no regrets. "We only used the technique on three people," he says. "We gained valuable information to protect the country, and it was the right thing to do, as far as I'm concerned."

On NPR's politics blog, Frank James highlights that "just because something is legal doesn't necessarily make it the moral choice... Put plainly, the question for the ex-president is, as a Christian, does he believe Jesus would approve waterboarding?"

President Obama banned the controversial tactic on his second day in the Oval Office. Attorney General Eric Holder said during his confirmation hearings that "waterboarding is torture."

#4 Extraordinary rendition



Syrian-born Canadian Maher Arar recounts his story of torture as his wife Monia Mazigh listens during a news conference in Ottawa, on Jan. 28, 2004.

(Jim Young/Reuters/File)

Like his predecessor Bill Clinton, George W. Bush employed the process of "extraordinary rendition," which allowed the CIA to detain suspects and transfer them to secret prisons in countries such as Egypt, Syria, or Afghanistan. The European Union has criticized the process.

In a 2006 op-ed, Institute for Policy Studies Director John Cavanagh recounted the plight of Maher Arar, a dual Canadian-Syrian citizen who was detained at JFK airport in 2002 on suspicion of being linked to Al Qaeda. He was 'rendered' to Syria, tortured, and released a year later. A Canadian investigation found him innocent of all terrorist ties, and the government apologized.

President Obama, days into his presidency, established a task force to ensure that the process of 'rendition' followed domestic

laws. But in September, according to the Monitor, the Ninth US Circuit Court of Appeals voted 6 to 5 to dismiss a lawsuit filed on behalf of five former terror suspects who charged they were whisked to undisclosed prisons overseas for brutal interrogations. The case drew criticism that Obama was upholding the policies of Bush.

#3 Guantánamo Bay



The entrance to Camp Delta at Guantánamo Bay is seen on Oct. 24.

(Colin Perkel/The Canadian Press/AP)

George W. Bush in 2002 authorized Guantánamo Bay, Cuba as a holding place for terrorism suspects. It was seen as a place beyond the reach of most US constitutional protections.

According to a book review in The New York Times, Mr. Bush "tries to play down the problems of Guantánamo Bay, writing that detainees were given 'a personal copy of the Koran' and access to a library among whose popular offerings was 'an Arabic translation of Harry Potter.' "

Prisoners at the detention center have said conditions are harsh, illegal, and inhumane. Bush said in 2005 that he was open to closing Guantanamo, and the number of detainees dropped in half to fewer than 300 by the time he left office.

On President Obama's second day in office, he ordered the Guantánamo detention camp closed within a year. Nearly two years later, however, the camp remains open amid dispute over where to transfer the remaining 174 detainees for prosecution.

During the Monitor's tour of the facility in 2009, "detainees noticed camp officials talking with two reporters who were taking notes.

One detainee began to shout. "Liar! Liar! Liar!" Another detainee on a wing on the other side of the recreation area joined in: "He is lying." Within moments, at least eight bearded detainees were pressing their faces close to the thick glass in the narrow windows in their individual cells, shouting to the reporters. "He is lying. He is lying."

Soon a chant went up. "Liar. Liar. Liar."

#2 WMD and Invading Iraq



US soldiers patrol a field in Kirkuk, north of Baghdad, on Oct. 25. The United States formally ended combat operations in Iraq in August, more than seven years after its troops ousted Saddam Hussein, and says Iraq is a much safer place.

(Saad Shalash/Reuters)

George W. Bush writes in his memoir that "removing [former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein] from power was the right decision... For all the difficulties that followed, America is safer without a homicidal dictator pursuing [weapons of mass destruction] and supporting terror at the heart of the Middle East."

In an interview this week with the Times of London, Mr. Bush said: "I was surprised when he didn't have [WMD]. That's the key point. Everybody thought he had them."

Nevertheless, one of Bush's main reasons for going to war – that Iraq was a "gathering danger" and held large stockpiles of chemical or biological weapons – turned out to be moot.

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair has also defended his decision to go to war by arguing that Saddam Hussein posed a significant risk, even if he did not hold weapons of mass destruction. But former Bush aide Karl Rove, in his recent book "Courage and Consequences," argues that Bush sincerely believed that Hussein had WMD and would not have gone to war otherwise.

Stanley Kober, a research fellow in foreign-policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, takes issue with that explanation in an op-ed for the Monitor.

"Since when has honesty been an excuse for starting a war under erroneous assumptions? In what other profession would such an argument be made and taken seriously?"

#1 Israel bombing Syria



Israel's then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

(Eliana Epont/AP/File)

"Decision Points" reveals that in 2007 Israel's then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert asked the United States to bomb a suspected nuclear facility in Syria, which Israel's Ynet News calls a "dramatic revelation."

Bush writes that he refused, on the grounds that "bombing a sovereign country with no warning or announced justification would create severe blowback," according to a review in *The Jerusalem Post*.

Mr. Olmert replied, "Your strategy is very disturbing to me." He then authorized a preemptive strike on the Syrian facility on Sept. 6, 2007, which Bush says he did not "green light."

"[Mr. Olmert] had done what he believed was necessary to protect Israel," writes Bush, adding that he felt the Israeli strike on Syria vindicated Israel after its 2006 war against Hezbollah.

Bush refused to comment at the time on the suspected Israeli bombing, leading David Ignatius to write in the *Washington Post* that "the silence from all parties has been deafening, but the message to Iran is clear: America and Israel can identify nuclear targets and penetrate air defenses to destroy them."

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