



Unlike other spy matters, Senate's probe of CIA's harsh interrogations raises partisan hackles

By David Lightman

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WASHINGTON — The toxic partisanship that's paralyzed most Washington lawmaking for years often spared congressional consideration of intelligence matters.

Not this time. Not when the topic is the CIA's use of enhanced interrogation techniques _ widely regarded as torture _ against detainees who were suspected terrorists.

For days, Republicans and Democrats on the Senate Intelligence Committee brawled over the Democratic-run panel's report detailing techniques used during the George W. Bush administration. The committee voted Thursday to declassify a summary of its findings, and President Barack Obama is now deciding whether to release those conclusions to the public, a process expected to take weeks.

"There was a lot more partisanship in the committee than you usually see," said Julian Sanchez, who specializes in national security and intelligence surveillance studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian research group.

Republicans saw the report as largely an indictment of a Bush-era policy, he said, and because the program is now defunct, it became easier to make political points.

Committee members have an informal bargain that whatever their disagreements in the private committee sessions, they stick together publicly. In recent months, lawmakers have been careful to stay largely bipartisan on matters involving the day's most volatile intelligence issue, the National Security Agency's bulk collection of Americans' phone records.

The partisan differences on the CIA report were stark. Committee Chairwoman Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., branded the findings as "shocking." Republican Sens. Marco Rubio of Florida and Jim Risch of Idaho countered: "This partisan effort deserves to be discredited."

Among the Republicans' complaints: Their staffs were not involved, nor were any interviews of key officials conducted.

Democrats said that the CIA's documents, including field reports and other data, effectively illustrated how the agency abused detainees during interrogations. Democrats maintained the report finally sheds light on outrageous behavior that should have been detailed long ago. Once findings are declassified, they are convinced, the public will be on their side.

"This report will rest on its facts, not people's interpretations of it, not on people's opinions," said Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-N.M. "I think it rests on such a strong body of evidence that people will be able to make up their own minds."

Partisan sniping is highly unusual on intelligence matters. Panel members are reluctant to even discuss anything involving the committee. After Thursday's vote, for instance, some even refused to acknowledge there had been a vote.

"It's always been a very bipartisan committee. We have our differences from time to time but overall we're bipartisan," said Sen. Saxby Chambliss of Georgia, the committee's top Republican. "It's shocking we ended up with what seems to be a political split."

The sniping over the CIA's interrogation techniques is not expected to forever poison committee deliberations, but it has generated very different reactions.

The report covers techniques that were controversial from the start, sparking outrage in many quarters a decade ago. McClatchy has found it involved 119 CIA detainees.

The findings reportedly illustrate that detainees were subjected to harsh interrogation techniques such as sleep deprivation, bright lights and loud music, and more widespread than the CIA has publicly acknowledged. For the past six years, the CIA has said 30 detainees endured such interrogations and three were waterboarded, a method of simulated drowning.

Some Republicans have been critical of the interrogations, notably Sens. John McCain of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina.

Bush administration officials for years defended the techniques as legal and useful, and Republican senators see the new Senate report as too one-sided.

"They spill things out but there's no context, and without context you don't get an accurate assessment of what's happening," charged Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla. "It doesn't mean that everything they did was right. But this report is totally biased."

Democrats say the report shows the techniques were not effective, and they have tried to make it clear this is Bush's issue. The interrogation controversy has "nothing to do" with the Obama administration, White House spokesman Jay Carney said last month.

Also helping inflame the partisan furor is its context _ it's another front in the political war that's gripped Washington for at least a decade. Year after year recently, matters that rarely stoked paralyzing partisan uproars now routinely do _ such as emergency unemployment compensation, farm policy, highway funding _ so it's almost logical the sharp divisions eventually would reach a highly sensitive intelligence matter.

"The whole political atmosphere is more toxic, and we have this hyper-partisanship on a lot of things," said Darrell West, vice president and director of governance studies at Washington's Brookings Institution, a research group.

This flareup, though, could be different from others in one way: It's unlikely to have much impact on electoral politics.

"It starts to be ancient history from a public opinion standpoint," said West of the CIA controversy.