



## Confronting our dark era

By Patrick Eddington  
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(CNN) -- After a multi-year odyssey marked by almost nonstop partisan bickering, CIA employees [hacking into Senate Intelligence Committee computers](#), and former Bush administration officials launching a pre-emptive public counterattack against the committee's report, we finally have a [summary of the CIA's use of torture](#).

So what have we learned?

The committee report confirms that six days after the 9/11 attacks, "President George W. Bush signed a covert action Memorandum of Notification (MON) to authorize the director of central intelligence (DCI) to 'undertake operations designed to capture and detain persons who pose a continuing, serious threat of violence or death to U.S. persons and interest or who are planning terrorist activities.'"

That decision put the CIA on the path to revive and even expand coercive interrogation techniques it had employed during the Cold War.

Some key facts we already knew were confirmed, most importantly that agency personnel violated U.S. and international law by repeatedly waterboarding several detainees, including 9/11 attack mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

The summary of the report provides lurid details of "24"-like interrogation techniques, outlawed by international treaties to which the U.S. is a signatory: running power drills next to the heads of detainees, days of forced sleep deprivation and, in the words of the committee summary, "threats to harm the children of a detainee, threats to sexually abuse the mother of a detainee, and a threat to 'cut (a detainee's) mother's throat.'"

The committee report summary also confirms what many have long believed -- that the torture program produced no actionable intelligence and did not to thwart al Qaeda's global activities.

The former chief of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center and torture program participant Jose Rodriguez [continues to claim](#) that such intelligence was obtained, and that it did in fact save lives. The available record, as laid out by the committee, amply refutes that assertion.

And the committee summary could not be clearer about the actions of agency managers and attorneys in the expansion of the use of techniques that were clear violations of international law. According to the committee summary:

" ... by the end of November 2001, CIA officers had begun researching potential legal defenses for using interrogation techniques that were considered torture by foreign governments and a non-governmental organization." CIA Director George Tenet subsequently sent a letter to Bush urging that the CIA program be exempt from Geneva Convention prohibitions on the use of techniques defined by international law as torture.

Whether as federal employees or political appointees, CIA personnel took an oath to uphold the laws of the United States. Instead, they chose to engage in acts that clearly violated those laws, including international treaties banning the use of torture to which the United States is not only a signatory, but a putative leader as well.

The response of multiple former intelligence community insiders who authorized or supported these programs is perfectly summed up in this quote from an anonymous former official [offered to the Daily Beast earlier this week](#):

"It goes back to the one basic thing: Whether they did right or they did wrong, they were told to do something, they did it, and they feel like they had the rug pulled out from underneath them."

Indeed, those CIA attorneys and managers who signed off on waterboarding and other tactics had an affirmative obligation to refuse to authorize, much less participate in, a torture program. Now, through de facto surrogates appearing on major media outlets and [operating a website](#) attempting to rewrite the history of this dark era, participants in the torture program claim they are the victims for simply following orders.

The defense of "I was just following orders" is never a winning one.

The use of mass surveillance and torture are the hallmarks of totalitarian governments. The United States has employed both since the September 11, 2001, attacks on our nation. While we have yet to renounce the former, the release of this Senate Intelligence Committee torture report summary is a long-overdue first step in renouncing the latter. Let's hope it's not the last step.

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