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Cheney on CIA torture: “I’d do it again in a minute”

Patrick Martin

15 December 2014

The interview with former Vice President Dick Cheney on NBC’s “Meet the Press” program Sunday morning showed both the unapologetic savagery of American imperialism and its deepening crisis.

Cheney defended the Bush administration’s CIA torture program against its partial exposure through the release last week of a Senate Intelligence Committee report that documents the criminality of CIA operatives and their political masters, including George W. Bush and Cheney himself.

Asked about particular torture methods, Cheney repeatedly defended such horrific and illegal actions as waterboarding, hanging prisoners by their arms from an overhead bar for 22 hours straight, and the procedure described as “involuntary rectal feeding,” which he claimed was “done for medical reasons.”

One remarkable exchange with interviewer Chuck Todd went as follows:

Todd: Let me read you another one here. With Abu Zubaydah, over a 20-day period, aggressive interrogations. Spent a total of 266 hours, 11 days, two hours, in a large coffin-sized confinement

box, 29 hours in a small confinement box, width of 21 inches, depth of 2.5 feet, height of 2.5 feet. That's on page 42. Is that going to meet the standard of the definition of torture?

Cheney: I think that was, in fact, one of the approved techniques.

When asked about the CIA's own admission that at least one-quarter of the prisoners detained and abused at its secret "black sites" were innocent of any connection to terrorism, Cheney replied, "I have no problem as long as we achieve our objective." He reiterated, "I'd do it again in a minute."

The former vice president seemed especially incensed by the suggestion that the CIA had lied to the White House about what it was doing at its secret prisons. He went out of his way to declare, even boast, that he and President George W. Bush were fully informed of what the CIA was doing and approved it every step of the way.

Again from the "Meet the Press" transcript:

Cheney: The notion that we were not notified at the White House about what was going on is not true. I sat through a lengthy session in '04 with the inspector general of the CIA as he reviewed the state of the program at that time. The suggestion, for example, that the president didn't approve it, wrong. That's a lie, that's not true... There would be special meetings from time to time on various subjects that he would be directly involved in. This man knew what we were doing. He authorized it; he approved it.

These statements should be entered as evidence at a future war crimes prosecution of Bush, Cheney and all those associated with the American torture enterprise.

When faced with the suggestion by the United Nations special rapporteur on torture that Bush administration officials—including himself—should be prosecuted, Cheney was contemptuous, but also defensive. He described it as "an outrageous proposition" that former US government officials even had to answer such questions.

On at least five occasions—particularly when pressed to respond to a specific method of torture—he tried to change the subject to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which have become the all-purpose excuse for every crime committed by American imperialism.

Cheney cited as proof that the Bush administration did not torture the legal opinions issued the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel that "specifically authorized and okayed... exactly what we did." In other words, the president's own lawyers, acting on his instructions, found that his orders to the CIA were legal. (In the same fashion, the Obama White House engineered a finding by the Office of Legal Counsel that the president could legally order the drone missile assassination of an American citizen.)

There was little to distinguish Cheney's arguments from the type of self-justification offered by the Nazi defendants at the Nuremberg Tribunal following World War II. Every action they took, Goering, Keitel, Frank and others declared, was justified by the necessities of war against a

savage enemy. Every action was in accordance with the legal principles laid down by the Third Reich.

Those further down the Nazi chain of command, like the CIA operatives and contractors who actually carried out the torture at the secret prisons, would plead that they were “just following orders.”

There is no reason to limit this comparison to the officials and operatives of the Bush administration. The Obama administration too consists of war criminals and their apologists. As one Bush defender pointed out in the panel discussion that followed Cheney’s appearance, under Obama, the US government is using drones to blow up its targets “and their families at picnics and weddings,” rather than capture them and torture them.

Obama himself reassured the torturers and murderers of both administrations that there would be no consequences for their actions, declaring within months of taking office that he would “look forward, not backward” on the crimes of the Bush era. This gave the green light to the CIA to shift its focus from waterboarding to drone missile assassinations.

The Obama Justice Department issued an official statement after the release of the 528-page unclassified executive summary of the Senate Intelligence Committee study, saying it had found no new information in either it or the full 6,700-page report. “Our inquiry was limited to a determination of whether prosecutable offenses were committed,” the department said.

The Justice Department added that if a foreign court took action against former or current US government officials, citing the evidence provided by the Senate report, the United States would raise “jurisdictional and other legal defenses to prevent unwarranted prosecution ...”

These statements confirm that no government of the American financial aristocracy will take action against the crimes committed in its name. In order to hold the war criminals, murderers and torturers accountable, it is necessary to build up a mass socialist movement from below, based on a turn to the international working class.