

Two parties of war and reaction

Hillary Clinton, Dick Cheney champion torture on eve of election

By Bill Van Auken and SEP candidate for US Senate from New York
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Back-to-back statements by the most prominent figures in both the Democratic and Republican parties endorsing the use of torture make it clear that the unprecedented assault on democratic rights and the government's recourse to criminal methods will continue after the November 7 midterm elections, no matter which party is victorious.

In an interview with a right-wing radio talk show host Tuesday, Vice President Dick Cheney publicly acknowledged that the Bush administration has utilized torture in the interrogation of so-called "enemy combatants" and said the decision to subject such detainees to the notorious practice of "waterboarding" was so obviously justified as to be a "no-brainer."

In the interview, Scott Hennen of WDAY in Fargo, North Dakota, told Cheney that the station's listeners had asked him to "let the vice president know that if it takes dunking a terrorist in water, we're all for it, if it saves American lives." He went on to describe the debate over this form of torture "silly" in the face of the supposed terrorist threat, and asked Cheney if he agreed.

Cheney concurred and described this form of interrogation as "a very important tool that we've had to be able to secure the nation." The administration has repeatedly stated that its illegal torture methods have foiled planned terrorist attacks, but has presented no evidence to back up this claim and has brought no one to trial in connection with these supposed plots.

The interviewer followed up by asking the vice president, "Would you agree that a dunk in the water is a no-brainer if it can save lives?"

"It's a no-brainer for me," Cheney responded, "but for a while there I was criticized as being the vice president 'for torture.' We don't torture.... But the fact is, you can have a fairly robust interrogation program without torture, and we need to be able to do that."

Cheney's claim that "we don't torture" is a patent lie. Waterboarding is a form of torture in which a victim's head is held under water or water is poured on a cloth held over the nose and mouth, simulating drowning and provoking the gagging reflex and panic. It is repeated until the subject agrees to talk.

This procedure is recognized internationally as a cruel and inhuman method constituting torture, and the US itself sentenced a Japanese soldier to 15 years in prison on war crimes charges for using the technique against an American prisoner of war. It has been banned by US law and explicitly repudiated by the military in the latest Army Field Manual.

The Cheney interview was conducted as part of an event that brought 42 radio hosts, the overwhelming majority of them

right-wing, to broadcast live interviews with administration officials from a tent on the White House lawn. The general message was one of McCarthyite accusations against the administration's political opponents and an effort to create a climate of fear in the face of ostensible terrorist threats in advance of the midterm elections.

Thus, Cheney told Hennen that the defeat of incumbent Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman in the Democratic primary this summer had sent "a message to the terrorists overseas that their basic strategy of trying to break the will of the American people may, in fact, work."

After declaring waterboarding a "no-brainer," Cheney said, "Thanks to the leadership of the president now, and the action of Congress, we have the authority and we are able to continue the program."

Cheney was referring to the 2006 Military Commissions Act, the sweeping legislation that creates a system of drumhead military tribunals and allows the president to lock up anyone as an "unlawful enemy combatant" on his sole say-so. Bush signed the measure into law October 17. The act represents the most serious attack on democratic rights constitutionally protected civil liberties in US history, for the first time repudiating the centuries-old right of habeas corpus, which bars arbitrary imprisonment, affirms that those detained must be duly charged in a court of law, and affords detainees the right to contest their imprisonment in court.

The law also cedes to the president the right to decide what interrogation techniques are lawful under the Geneva Conventions and US law, in effect giving the Bush administration a blank check to continue its torture methods.

It is clear from Cheney's comments that the White House sees this act, passed by a substantial majority by both houses of Congress, as not only a license to torture, but an affirmation that the president as "commander-in-chief" has the power to do whatever he likes in the name of waging the so-called "global war on terror."

But the creation of the legal framework for an authoritarian and repressive state, one that enshrines torture in its legal code, is not merely the project of the right-wing Republicans who run the Bush White House.

While feigning outrage over the 2006 Military Commissions Act and posing as defenders of civil liberties, the Democrats in Congress—a substantial number of whom voted for the measure in both houses—deliberately stood aside and allowed the measure to be passed.

The party's leaders in the Senate entered into an agreement with the Republican leadership not to filibuster the act. The Democrats have

utilized this legislative tactic on previous occasions over far less weighty issues than a bill that explicitly repudiates bedrock democratic rights and core principles of the US Constitution. The Democrats' aim was to counter the Republicans' election propaganda that the party is "soft on terrorism."

Among those who facilitated the passage of the Military Commissions Act was my opponent, New York's Democratic Senator Hillary Clinton. She took the floor of the Senate to condemn the legislation. Calling attention to the section of the bill allowing the president to issue executive decrees establishing what methods of interrogation are permissible, Clinton asked rhetorically, "Have we fallen so low as to debate how much torture we are willing to stomach?" Yet she, like the other Democrats in the Senate, stood back and allowed the measure to be brought to a vote on the Senate floor, knowing it would pass.

With barely two weeks of making her anti-torture speech, Ms. Clinton made it clear that she herself has a stomach for torture after all.

Speaking to the New York *Daily News* editorial board on October 11, Clinton said she recognized that in some situations interrogations called for "severity." According to the newspaper, the conversation included mention of waterboarding, hypothermia and other methods recognized internationally as torture.

"I have said that those are very rare, but if they occur there has to be some lawful authority for pursuing that," she responded. "Again, I think the president has to take responsibility. There has to be some check and balance, some reporting. I don't mind if it's reporting in a top secret context."

Asked again about the permissibility of torture, she declared: "In those instances where we have sufficient basis to believe that there is something imminent, yeah, but then we've got to have a check and balance."

In other words, Clinton is prepared to support legislation explicitly granting the US president the right to order the torture of any suspect, so long as the president claims there exists an "imminent threat" to national security—something the Bush White House does on a nearly routine basis. As a "check and balance," she proposes a "top secret" report to members of Congress that will be concealed from the American people.

Last month, the Democratic senator's husband, Bill Clinton, made a similar statement, proposing that a court be established to issue torture warrants. "If they really believe the time comes when the only way they can get a reliable piece of information is to beat it out of someone or put a drug in their body to talk it out of 'em, then they can present it to the Foreign Intelligence Court, or some other court, just under the same circumstances we do with wiretaps. Post facto...."

In other words, the former Democratic president is proposing to set up courts that would provide legal sanction for torture—after the fact. Interrogators would have the comfort of knowing they could torture suspects, including American citizens, and concoct a justification for their actions after they had extracted a confession.

That both parties openly defend such methods and debate them in the midst of a national election campaign is, as Ms. Clinton stated in the Senate, an indication of just how low America's two-party system has fallen. It is also a measure of how thoroughly the US ruling elite has repudiated any commitment to the most elementary guarantees of democratic rights.

This election campaign has revealed the absence of any substantive differences between the Democratic Party and the Bush White House

on these questions. Both big business parties embrace the "war on terror" as the justification for waging war of aggression abroad and repudiating democratic rights and constitutional forms of rule within the US itself.

Hillary Clinton's recent debate with her right-wing Republican opponent John Spencer bore this out. While Spencer attempted to charge the Democratic incumbent with having opposed the repressive USA Patriot Act as well as the Bush administration's illegal National Security Agency (NSA) wiretap program, Clinton countered that her disagreements with both were merely of a procedural or tactical character.

She pointed out that she had voted both for the original Patriot Act—which passed the Senate with only one dissenting vote in 2001—and for its renewal earlier this year. She had merely sought continued debate on the legislation, primarily with the aim of obtaining more funding for New York police and security agencies.

As for the NSA spying operation, she recognized that "in cases of true emergencies," police and intelligence agencies should have the power to conduct warrantless surveillance—obtaining court approval after the fact—but objected to the administration's failure to keep Congress informed.

It is abundantly clear that a victory for the Democrats in November and even their capture of the White House in 2008 will not result in a repeal of the Patriot Act, the Military Commissions Act or any of the other police-state measures enacted under Bush. Both parties are fully engaged in erecting the legal framework for a presidential dictatorship.

This is not a matter fundamentally of right-wing ideology. Rather, it is the inevitable political manifestation of the immense and widening inequality that has become the preeminent feature of American social life.

Under conditions in which the gap between a financial oligarchy at the top and the broad masses of working people has reached historically unprecedented proportions, democracy has become unsustainable. As far as the ruling elite is concerned, the real threat comes not from Islamic terrorists, but rather from the broad mass of working people within the United States. It is building up the police powers of the state to carry out political repression at home and counter the threat of a social revolt from below.

The defense of democratic rights today is possible only through the independent political mobilization of masses of working people based on a socialist program that aims to put an end to the profit system, which is responsible for intensifying social inequality.

The Socialist Equality Party is intervening in the November 7 elections to lay the political foundations for such a mass socialist movement. A vote for our candidates will strengthen this effort, but above all, the struggle against war, repression and social inequality calls for workers, students and young people to join the SEP and take up the fight for a socialist alternative.

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