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Did Obama Pave the Way for More Torture?

By John Laforge
February 24, 2017

If we do not act we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.

— Martin Luther King, Jr. April 4, 1967

On Jan. 25, 26 and 27, the new president repeated falsely that “torture works.” Claiming to have spoken with high-level intelligence officers, Trump said they told him torture works “absolutely.”

This implausible story flies in the face of the 2014 Senate Intelligence Committee report which concluded that torture is not merely illegal but worthless. The 6,000+-page report found that torture produced “fabricated information, resulting in faulty intelligence.” This common knowledge has been settled law for so long that torture has been prohibited by international treaties and US statutes. Historian Michael Kwass reminds us that as early as 1764, Cesare Beccaria called for abolishing torture because it is immoral and doesn’t work. For good measure, the Senate again voted to ban torture in 2015.

On Feb. 17 last year at an event in Bluffton, S.C., Trump said, “Don’t tell me it doesn’t work — torture works,” and, “Half these guys [say], ‘Torture doesn’t work.’ Believe me, it works. ... I would bring back waterboarding. And I would bring back a hell of a lot worse than waterboarding.” At a big rally Nov. 23, 2015, he said, “Would I approve waterboarding? You bet your ass I would, in a heartbeat, in a heartbeat. And don’t kid yourself folks, it works, okay, it works. Only a stupid person would say it doesn’t work. It works.” At a Republican debate last March he said, “Waterboarding is fine, and if we want to go stronger I’d go stronger too. We should go for waterboarding and we should go tougher than waterboarding.” In a televised chat with South Carolina State Rep. Bill Herbkersman, Trump said that if elected he would “immediately” resume waterboarding and “much worse,” calling waterboarding a “minor form” of interrogation.

Asked about military personnel refusing such an unlawful order, Trump has said, “I’m a leader. If I say ‘Do it,’ they’re gonna do it.” Trump even threatened atrocities late last November at a rally in Columbus, Ohio, where he said, “If it doesn’t work they deserve it anyway, for what they’re doing,” indicating he would use torture for publicity or propaganda.

Door left wide open

When president Obama chose not to pursue criminal charges of torture against George Bush, Dick Cheney, Don Rumsfeld and other administration officials including Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller, Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, and the CIA’s Gina Haspel, the principle outcry was that Obama’s negligence left the door open to future torture programs. With Trump in the White House, it’s certain that Obama’s decision was an inexcusable blunder. If Trump keeps his promise to commit atrocities like those committed under Bush/Cheney/Haspel, President Obama will be partly to blame.

On Feb. 2, Trump appointed Ms. Haspel deputy director of the CIA, a move that telegraphs his intentions. Haspel personally oversaw the torture of two men at her secret CIA prison in Thailand. Haspel’s torture sessions were videotaped — as were many others — and when the tapes’ existence became known, the CIA destroyed them — in violation of court orders to preserve evidence. One name appearing on the order for destruction was Gina Haspel, Matthew Rosenberg reported in the New York Times.

By 2007, the CIA’s videotape destruction was a full-blown scandal, and even then-Senator Joe Biden publicly charged that the tapes’ destruction and the war crimes they documented called for a Special Prosecutor. Biden evidently dropped this thought as Obama’s VP.

Because Trump does not read books, and learns what he “knows” from television alone, his idea of torture may not go beyond the fictional TV torture promo called “24.” Of course the strategists whispering in Trump’s ear may remind him that torture “works,” not in the TV sense, but in the sense that when the public knows that its government tortures opponents, the opposition tends to cower and shrink. Torture works to terrify your own people.

Obama himself continued for years to allow the force-feeding of hunger strikers at Guantanamo Bay, an excruciating and sometimes bloody practice involving a plastic tube being painfully

forced into the nose and down the throat of the prisoner. In 2013, at least 35 prisoners at Guantanamo were being force-fed, according to the Miami Herald. The UN Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights ruled in May 2013 that force feeding was “cruel, inhuman and degrading” and as such a “flagrant violation of international human rights law.” Prof. Steven Miles at the U. of Minn. told reporters that considering its long-term use and the military’s methods, Obama’s force-feeding “constitutes torture.”

Jenna Johnson, reporting in the Washington Post, noted last summer that “Trump’s call for waterboarding and more extreme measures is always met with warm applause and cheers at his rallies.” It is thanks to Trump’s chant “torture works,” thanks to TV’s fictionalized treatment of torture, and thanks to Obama’s euphemisms like “force-feeding” that in December 2016 the Red Cross could report that 46 percent of the US adults it surveyed said torture could be used to obtain information from enemy soldiers.

Today, unless the public confronts torture in all its permutations, the new administration may again drag the United States further “down the long, dark and shameful corridors.”