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The Hard Facts About Torture and Bin Laden's Death

By Juan Williams

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Philip Graham, the former publisher of The Washington Post, is credited with saying that “journalism is the first rough draft of history.”

Since Usama bin Laden’s death, American journalism has been locked in a political spin cycle. President Obama has celebrated the end of America’s number one enemy at Ground Zero, with the military and the CIA. Bush administration officials have aggressively argued that President Bush deserves credit, too. The media recorded all of this as a predictable grab for political credit and moved on to other things.

But this is one time when it is important for journalism to stop the show, go back and make a critical point for the “first rough draft of history.”

The torture apologists are wrong. There is no credit to be given to the Bush White House for allowing the use of torture. There is no evidence that the use of torture helped U.S. agents locate bin Laden. Whether it is called “torture” or “waterboarding” or “enhanced interrogation techniques,” it did not lead to the Navy SEALs raiding the al Qaeda leader’s compound in Pakistan.

In fact, there is evidence torture may have delayed the delivery of justice to the world’s most wanted terrorist. According to CIA Director Leon Panetta, intelligence analysts had to sift through false information acquired from detainees who were subject to enhanced

interrogation techniques. In a letter to Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) obtained by The Washington Post, Panetta took great pains to correct the record on the enhanced interrogation question:

“We first learned about the facilitator/courier’s nom de guerre from a detainee not in CIA custody in 2002. It is also important to note that some detainees who were subjected to enhanced interrogation techniques attempted to provide false or misleading information about the facilitator/courier.” Panetta went on to say: “In the end, no detainee in CIA custody revealed the facilitator/courier’s full true name or specific whereabouts. This information was discovered through other intelligence means.”

This is not a matter of opinion — it is a matter of fact.

To be clear, my conscience cannot abide torture — or any other euphemism used to describe it. Torture is inconsistent with American values and international law. But personal beliefs — from the left or right — do not change the facts. Somehow journalism has let the facts become tangled by the political spin. A cadre of rightwing politicians and commentators are trying to rewrite the history of the bin Laden operation in order to vindicate their support for the Bush-era enhanced interrogation techniques.

Rep. Peter King (R-N.Y.) chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, made this claim on TV: “Usama bin Laden would not have been captured and killed if it were not for the initial information we got from Khalid Sheikh Mohammed after he was waterboarded.”

John Yoo, the former Bush administration official in the Justice Department who wrote memos on torture used to justify waterboarding despite U.S. laws and the Geneva Conventions, wrote in the Wall Street Journal that Obama should “recognize that he succeeded despite his urge to disavow Bush administration policies. Perhaps one day he will acknowledge his predecessor’s role in making this week’s dramatic success possible. More importantly, he should restart the interrogation program that helped lead us to bin Laden.”

Former Bush Attorney General Michael Mukasey wrote a column in the Journal asserting the claim as fact: “Consider how the intelligence that led to bin Laden came to hand. It began with a disclosure from Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who broke like a dam under the pressure of harsh interrogation techniques that included waterboarding. He loosed a torrent of information — including eventually the nickname of a trusted courier of bin Laden.”

King, Yoo and Mukasey want to stop an ongoing Justice Department investigation that may end with several top Bush administration officials being identified as having broken the law to authorize the use of torture. That, too, is a fact in this debate. Beyond that fact, those Bush administration officials were deliberately distorting history or were themselves misinformed.

Torture did not help America find bin Laden. That is the bottom line for history. But that is not the end of the debate. McCain, a fellow Republican and a man who personally knows the horror and the ineffectiveness of torture, refuted their claims. As he wrote in the Washington Post: “Ultimately, this is more than a utilitarian debate. This is a moral debate. It is about who we are.”

This week Congress will vote to reauthorize the Patriot Act which, like waterboarding, was a centerpiece of the Bush anti-terror program.

How we can have an honest debate about enhanced interrogation or the Patriot Act or other anti-terror programs when facts are ignored?

This is not the time for historical revisionism or political spin. The truth is too important.