

The Ugly Specter of Torture and Lies

Exclusive: President Obama refused to hold “war on terror” torturers to account but punished truth-tellers severely, a bleak legacy not erased by Chelsea Manning’s belated commutation, as Jonathan Marshall explains.

By Jonathan Marshall

January 17 was an unusually good day for truth and human rights on both sides of the Atlantic. Even before President Obama commuted whistleblower Chelsea Manning’s long prison sentence, the British Supreme Court ruled unanimously that government ministers cannot claim “state immunity” or other specious grounds to avoid legal accountability in cases of abduction (rendition) and torture. The decision was heralded by Amnesty International, the International Commission of Jurists, and other human rights groups.

The lawsuit against Britain’s former foreign secretary, Jack Straw, and a former senior intelligence officer was brought by Libyan dissident Abdel Hakim Belhaj, a militant opponent of Muammar Gaddafi. He was kidnapped with his pregnant wife from Bangkok in March 2004 based on a tip from MI6, the British intelligence service.

Taken to a secret CIA prison in Thailand, they were blindfolded, hooded, hung from hooks on the cell wall, beaten, and blasted with loud music. A few days later the CIA flew them to Tripoli, where Belhaj was jailed and tortured by the Libyan regime for six years. He says he was also interrogated by British intelligence officers.

Owing to an edict by President Obama, Bush administration officials have never been tried for their complicity in more than 60 renditions of CIA prisoners, but Britain’s senior officials may face justice thanks to their Supreme Court ruling, which cited legal authorities ranging from the Magna Carta of 1215 to the United Nations Convention Against Torture.

Evidence of official British complicity in the kidnapping of Belhaj was discovered by Human Rights Watch in Gaddafi’s intelligence files after the Libyan dictator was overthrown in 2011. A 2004 fax by the chief of counterterrorism at MI6 to his Libyan counterpart said of Belhaj’s capture, “This was the least we could do for you and for Libya to demonstrate the remarkable relationship we have built in recent years.”

Seeking Favors from Gaddafi

At the time, Prime Minister Tony Blair’s government was cozying up to Gaddafi,

not only to fight Islamist extremists but to exploit lucrative business opportunities in the sectors of oil and finance. (Blair continued to visit Gaddafi even after Blair left office to pursue banking deals for JP Morgan, according to a senior executive with the \$70 billion Libyan Investment Authority.)

A 2012 story in the *Guardian* on the Belhaj case reported:

“Two weeks after the couple were rendered to Libya, Tony Blair paid his first visit to the country, embracing Gaddafi and declaring that Libya had recognized ‘a common cause, with us, in the fight against al-Qaida extremism and terrorism.’ At the same time, in London, the Anglo-Dutch oil giant Shell announced that it had signed a £110m deal for gas exploration rights off the Libyan coast.

“Three days after that, a second leading [anti-Gaddafi activist], Abu Munthir al-Saadi, was bundled aboard a plane in Hong Kong and taken to Tripoli in a joint British-Libyan rendition operation. Saadi’s wife and four children were also kidnapped and taken to Libya. The youngest was a girl aged six. The family was incarcerated . . . for more than two months before being released. Saadi and Belhaj were held for more than six years, however, and say they were subjected to torture throughout this time.”

In 2005, responding to revelations of such abuses in the U.S.-led “war on terror,” Foreign Secretary Straw insisted that the United Kingdom had not rendered suspects to other countries:

“Unless we all start to believe in conspiracy theories and that the officials are lying, that I am lying, that behind this there is some kind of secret state which is in league with some dark forces in the United States, . . . there simply is no truth in the claims that the United Kingdom has been involved in rendition full stop, because we have not been.” (The contrary evidence surfaced six years later, in 2011.)

In 2012, Saadi reached a £2.2 million settlement with the British government, which did not admit guilt. But Belhaj, who has asked for just £3 in damages, demands something money can’t buy: an official apology. Straw continues to deny responsibility for any unlawful renditions.

Andrew Tyrie, a Conservative MP and chairman of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Extraordinary Rendition, praised the latest ruling for bringing the public “a step closer to the truth about Britain’s role in extraordinary rendition – the program of kidnap and torture developed during the Bush administration, and facilitated by the UK government.”

He added, "The risk now is that the new laws on secret hearings – in the Justice and Security Act – could nonetheless thwart efforts to get to the truth, and undermine the ability of the courts to demonstrate that justice is being done. It would be bad for British justice if most of this case ends up buried in closed material proceedings."

Obama's Failure

The British government, which has spent more than £600,000 to fight the Belhaj case, claims that a full airing of the facts would seriously damage relations with the United States. President Obama could have knocked that assertion down at any time and welcomed the truth. Instead, he consistently refused throughout his two terms in office to convene a truth commission or hold anyone accountable for illegal rendition and torture (short of death). He even invoked the "state secrets" doctrine to block private lawsuits against government officials for torture.

Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, wrote in 2011, "Obama's deliberate suppression of this shameful past is wrong. It reflects bad policy, a dereliction of presidential responsibilities and a continuing disregard for international law. It treats torture as a policy option – one that can be turned on or off at presidential will."

With a noted supporter of torture now moving into the White House, the folly of Obama's approach is clearer than ever. That's why a spokesman for the human rights legal defense organization Reprieve declared, "this case isn't just about history. . . In 72 hours, a would-be torturer will take the reins of Earth's most powerful security state. We enter the Trump era with not a soul held to account for Britain's past role in rendition. . . Our intelligence agencies may well be pressured to help America torture again."

To discourage that from happening, he urged Prime Minister Theresa May to "apologize to this family, draw a line in the sand against torture, and restore British honor once and for all."

Jonathan Marshall is author of many recent articles on arms issues, including "How World War III Could Start," "NATO's Provocative Anti-Russian Moves," "Escalations in a New Cold War," "Ticking Closer to Midnight," and "Turkey's Nukes: A Sum of All Fears."

Obama's Bombing Legacy

Exclusive: President Obama has joked he still doesn't know why he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, but his record of waging war was no joke to thousands at the receiving end of U.S. bombs, says Nicolas J S Davies.

By Nicolas J S Davies

As President Obama leaves office, much of his foreign policy record remains shrouded in the symbolism that has been the hallmark of his presidency. The persistence of Obama's image as a reluctant war-maker and a Nobel Peace Prize winner has allowed Donald Trump and his cabinet nominees to claim that Obama has underfunded the military and been less than aggressive in his use of U.S. military power.

Nothing could be further from the truth, and their claims are clearly designed only to justify even more extravagant military spending and more aggressive threats and uses of force than those perpetrated under Mr. Obama's "disguised, quiet, media-free" war policy.

The reality is that Obama has increased U.S. military spending beyond the post-World War II record set by President George W. Bush. Now that Obama has signed the military budget for FY2017, the final record is that Obama has spent an average of \$653.6 billion per year, outstripping Bush by an average of \$18.7 billion per year (in 2016 dollars).

In historical terms, after adjusting for inflation, Obama's military spending has been 56 percent higher than Clinton's, 16 percent higher than Reagan's, and 42 percent more than the U.S. Cold War average, when it was justified by a military competition with a real peer competitor in the Soviet Union. By contrast, Russia now spends one-tenth of what we are pouring into military forces, weapon-building and war.

What all this money has paid for has been the polar opposite of what most of Obama's supporters thought they were voting for in 2008. Behind the iconic image of a hip, sophisticated celebrity-in-chief with strong roots in modern urban culture, lies a calculated contrast between image and reality that has stretched our country's neoliberal experiment in "managed democracy" farther than ever before and set us up for the previously unthinkable "post-truth" presidency of Donald Trump.

Obama's Model

Obama's doctrine of covert and proxy war was modeled on the Phoenix Program in

Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s and Ronald Reagan's proxy wars in Central America in the 1980s. It involved a massive expansion of U.S. special operations forces, now deployed to 138 different countries, compared with only 60 when Obama took office.

As senior military officers told the Washington Post in June 2010, the Obama administration allowed, "things that the previous administration did not," and, "They are talking publicly much less but they are acting more. They are willing to get aggressive much more quickly."

Wherever possible, U.S. forces have recruited and trained proxy forces to do the actual fighting and dying, from the Iraqi government's Shiite death squads to Al Qaeda splinter groups in Libya and Syria (supporting "regime change" projects in those countries) to mercenaries serving Arab monarchies and seemingly endless cannon fodder for the war in Afghanistan.

Obama's ten-fold expansion of drone strikes further reduced U.S. casualties relative to numbers of foreigners killed. This fostered an illusion of peace and normality for Americans in the homeland even as the death toll inflicted by America's post-9/11 wars almost certainly passed the two million mark.

The targets of these covert and proxy wars are not just guerrilla fighters or "terrorists" but also the "infrastructure" or "civilian support mechanism" that supports guerrillas with food and supplies, and the entire shadow government and civil society in areas that resist domination.

As a U.S. officer in Iraq explained to Newsweek in 2005, "The Sunni population is paying no price for the support it is giving the terrorists. From their point of view, it is cost-free. We have to change that equation."

In previous decades, the victims of similar operations in Central America included the grandfather of a young lady I met in Cotzal in Guatemala – he was beheaded by an Army death squad for giving food to the Guerrilla Army of the Poor. The Catholic Church has now named Father Stanley Rother from Oklahoma, who was killed by a Guatemalan Army death squad in Santiago Atitlan in 1981, as a martyr and candidate for sainthood.

Bloody Iraq

In Iraq, the targets of such operations have included hundreds of academics and other professionals and community leaders. Just last week, U.S. air strikes targeted and killed three senior professors and their families in their homes at Mosul University. The victims included Dr. Mohamad Tybee Al-Layla (Ph.D. Texas), the highly respected former Dean of the College of Engineering.

In 2004, after the assassination of Dr. Abdul-Latif Ali Al-Mayah in Baghdad, a senior police officer explained who killed him and why to British journalist Stephen Grey: “Dr. Abdul-Latif was becoming more and more popular because he spoke for people on the street here. ... You can look no further than the Governing Council. They are politicians that are backed by the Americans and who arrived to Iraq from exile with a list of their enemies. I’ve seen these lists. They are killing people one by one.”

As Obama’s murderous proxy wars in Iraq and Syria have spun further out of control, U.S. special operations forces and U.S.-trained death squads on the ground have increasingly been backed up by U.S. and allied air forces. Four years ago, as Obama was inaugurated for a second term, I wrote that the U.S. and its allies dropped 20,000 bombs and missiles in his first term. In his second term, they have dropped four times that number, bringing the total for Obama’s presidency to over 100,000 bombs and missiles striking seven countries, surpassing the 70,000 unleashed on five countries by George W. Bush.

Obama inherited a massive air campaign already under way in Afghanistan, where the U.S. and its allies dropped over 4,000 bombs and missiles every year for six years between 2007 and 2012. Altogether, U.S.-led air forces have dropped 26,000 bombs and missiles on Afghanistan under Obama, compared with 37,000 under Bush, for a total of 63,000 bomb and missile strikes in 15 years.

But the new U.S.-led bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria since 2014 has been much heavier, with 65,730 bomb and missile strikes in 2 1/2 years. Iraq has now been struck with 74,000 bombs and missiles, even more than Afghanistan: 29,200 in the “Shock & Awe” assault of 2003; 3,900 more before the invasion and during the U.S. occupation; and now another 41,000 in “Shock & Awe II” since 2014, including the current siege and bombardment of Mosul.

Obama’s total of 100,000 air strikes are rounded out by 24,700 bombs and missiles dropped on Syria, 7,700 in NATO and its Arab monarchist allies’ bombing of Libya in 2011, another 496 strikes in Libya in 2016, and at least 547 drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia.

Failed Policy

Donald Trump and his choices for secretaries of State and Defense, Rex Tillerson and Jim Mattis, respectively, are right to say that Obama’s war policy has failed. But they are wrong to insist that the answer is to spend even more on weapons and use them even more aggressively.

Obama’s failure was the result of his deference to generals, admirals, the CIA and hawkish advisers like Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Ambassador to

the United Nations Samantha Power, and of his blind faith in U.S. military power. But war was never a legitimate or effective response to terrorism.

The misuse of military force has only spread violence and chaos across the Muslim world and spawned an explosive mix of political disintegration, rule by militias and warlords, a dizzying proliferation of armed groups with different interests and loyalties and, ultimately, more blowback for the West.

Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Turkey, Israel, Qatar and other “allies” have been only too eager to exploit and redirect our aggression against their own enemies: Iran; Syria; Libya; and different ethnic groups, minorities and political movements in what was, for centuries, a diverse, tolerant region of the world.

The U.S. has become a blind giant stumbling through a thick forest of shadows and unseen dangers, striking out with its devastating war machine at the instigation of self-serving allies and the same dark forces in its own “intelligence” bureaucracy who have stirred up trouble, staged coups and unleashed war in country after country for seventy years.

The only consistent beneficiary in all this death, destruction and chaos is the “military industrial complex” that President Eisenhower warned us against in his farewell address in 1961.

In 2012, I researched and wrote about how General Dynamics CEO Lester Crown and his Chicago family backed and bankrolled the political career of Barack Obama. As manufacturers of *Virginia* class submarines, *Arleigh Burke* and *Zumwalt* destroyers and littoral combat ships (all programs saved, revived or expanded by Obama) as well as other types of munitions, the Crown family’s patronage of Barack Obama has proven to be a profitable investment, from the violence and chaos in the Muslim world to the New Cold War with Russia to the “pivot” to the South China Sea.

Now Mr. Trump has nominated General Dynamics board member, General James “Mad Dog” Mattis as Secretary of Defense, despite his responsibility for illegal rules of engagement and systematic war crimes in Iraq, an obvious conflict of interest with the millions he has earned at General Dynamics and clear laws that require civilian control of the military.

When will we ever learn to tell the difference between corrupt warmongers like Obama and Mattis and progressive leaders who will let us live in peace with our neighbors around the world, even at the expense of General Dynamics’ profits?

Nicolas J S Davies is the author of *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. He also wrote the chapters on “Obama at War” in

Grading the 44th President: a Report Card on Barack Obama's First Term as a Progressive Leader.
