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WASHINGTON – Widening an explosive debate on torture, President Barack Obama on Tuesday opened the possibility of prosecution for Bush-era lawyers who authorized brutal interrogation of terror suspects and suggested Congress might order a full investigation.

Less than a week after declaring it was time for the nation to move on rather than "laying blame for the past," Obama found himself describing what might be done next to investigate what he called the loss of "our moral bearings."

His comments all but ensured that the vexing issue of detainee interrogation during the Bush administration will live on well into the new president's term. Obama, who severely criticized the harsh techniques during the campaign, is feeling pressure from his party's liberal wing to come down hard on the subject. At the same time, Republicans including former Vice President Dick Cheney are insisting the methods helped protect the nation and are assailing Obama for revealing Justice Department memos detailing them.

Answering a reporter's question Tuesday, Obama said it would be up to his attorney general to determine whether "those who formulated those legal decisions" behind the interrogation methods should be prosecuted. The methods, described in Bush-era memos Obama released last Thursday, included such grim and demeaning tactics as slamming detainees against walls and subjecting them to simulated drowning.

He said anew that CIA operatives who did the interrogating should not be charged with crimes because they thought they were following the law.

"I think there are a host of very complicated issues involved here," the president said. "As a general deal, I think that we should be looking forward and not backwards. I do worry about this getting so politicized that we cannot function effectively, and it hampers our ability to carry out national security operations."

Still, he suggested that Congress might set up a bipartisan review, outside its typical hearings, if it wants a "further accounting" of what happened during the period when the interrogation methods were authorized. His press secretary later said the independent Sept. 11 commission, which investigated and then reported on the terror attacks of 2001, might be a model.

The harsher methods were authorized to gain information after the 2001 attacks.

The three men facing the most scrutiny are former Justice Department officials Jay Bybee, John Yoo and Steven Bradbury. Bybee is currently a judge on the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. Yoo is a professor at the University of California-Berkeley.

It might be argued that the officials were simply doing their jobs, providing legal advice for the Bush administration. However, John Strait, a law professor at Seattle University said, "I think there are a slew of potential charges."

Those could include conspiracy to commit felonies, including torture, he suggested.

Bybee also could face impeachment in Congress if lawmakers were so inclined.

A federal investigation into the memos is being conducted by the Justice Department's Office of Professional Responsibility

, which usually limits itself to examining the ethical behavior of employees but whose work in rare cases leads to criminal investigations.

The chairmen of the Senate and House Judiciary committees said Tuesday they want to move ahead with previously proposed, independent commissions to examine George W. Bush's national security policies.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., who has referred to his proposed panel as a "Truth Commission," said, "I agree with President Obama: An examination into these Bush-Cheney era national security policies must be nonpartisan. ... Unfortunately, Republicans have shown no interest in a nonpartisan review."

Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., has proposed separate hearings by his committee in addition to an independent commission.

Over the past weekend, White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel said in a television interview the administration did not support prosecutions for "those who devised policy." White House aides say he was referring to CIA superiors who ordered the interrogations, not the Justice Department officials who wrote the legal memos allowing them.

Yet it was unclear exactly whom Obama meant in opening the door to potential prosecutions of those who "formulated the legal decisions." Press Secretary Robert Gibbs was asked if the president meant the lawyers who declared the interrogation methods legal, or the policymakers who ordered, them or both.

"I don't know the answer to that," Gibbs said during a briefing in which he was peppered with questions about the president's words. Later, he added: "The parsing of some of this is better done through a filter of the rule of law and done at the Justice Department and not done here at the White House."

When pressed about any confusion stemming from his comments and Emanuel's, Gibbs said: "Take what the president said, as I'm informed he got more votes than either of the two of us."

A number of Republicans, including former Vice President Cheney and former top intelligence officials, say Obama has undermined national security with his release of the memos on the matter. On the other side, some Democratic lawmakers, human rights groups and liberal advocates want to see punishment for those involved in sanctioning brutal interrogations — the kind they say amount to torture and have damaged U.S. standing around the world.

"Certainly, this is an attempt not just to stake a ground between the left and the right, but also to navigate through something that he would prefer not be there as an ongoing issue," said Norman Ornstein, a scholar of U.S. politics at the American Enterprise Institute.

"He's walking the tightrope," Ornstein added. "You don't want to give a blanket, 'Everything's OK, we're only moving forward.' And you don't want a president making a decision that it is a legal decision."

Obama said he was not proposing that another investigation be launched, but if it happens it should be done in a way that does not "provide one side or another political advantage but rather is being done in order to learn some lessons so that we move forward in an effective way."

Associated Press writers Devlin Barrett and Larry Margasak contributed to this report.