

By Robert Windrem, May 21, 2009

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Former NBC News investigative producer Robert Windrem reports that the vice president's office suggested waterboarding an Iraqi prisoner who was suspected of knowing about a relationship between al Qaeda and Saddam.

Robert Windrem, who covered terrorism for NBC, reports exclusively in The Daily Beast that:

**Two U.S. intelligence officers confirm that Vice President Cheney's office suggested waterboarding an Iraqi prisoner, a former intelligence official for Saddam Hussein, who was suspected to have knowledge of a Saddam-al Qaeda connection.*

**The former chief of the Iraq Survey Group, Charles Duelfer, in charge of interrogations, tells The Daily Beast that he considered the request reprehensible.*

**Much of the information in the report of the 9/11 Commission was provided through more than 30 sessions of torture of detainees.*

At the end of April 2003, not long after the fall of Baghdad, U.S. forces captured an Iraqi who Bush White House officials suspected might provide information of a relationship between al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein's regime. Muhammed Khudayr al-Dulaymi was the head of the M-14 section of Mukhabarat, one of Saddam's secret police organizations. His responsibilities included chemical weapons and contacts with terrorist groups.

Two senior U.S. intelligence officials at the time tell The Daily Beast that the suggestion to waterboard an Iraqi prisoner came from the Office of Vice President Cheney.

“To those who wanted or suspected a relationship, he would have been a guy who would know, so [White House officials] had particular interest,” Charles Duelfer, head of the Iraqi Survey Group and the man in charge of interrogations of Iraqi officials, told me. So much so that the officials, according to Duelfer, inquired how the interrogation was proceeding.

In his new book, [*Hide and Seek: The Search for Truth in Iraq*](#), and in an interview with The Daily Beast, Duelfer says he heard from “some in Washington at very senior levels (not in the CIA),” who thought Khudayr’s interrogation had been “too gentle” and suggested another route, one that they believed has proven effective elsewhere. “They asked if enhanced measures, such as waterboarding, should be used,” Duelfer writes. “The executive authorities addressing those measures made clear that such techniques could legally be applied only to terrorism cases, and our debriefings were not as yet terrorism-related. The debriefings were just debriefings, even for this creature.”

Duelfer will not disclose who in Washington had proposed the use of waterboarding, saying only: “The language I can use is what has been cleared.” In fact, two senior U.S. intelligence officials at the time tell The Daily Beast that the suggestion to waterboard came from the Office of Vice President Cheney. Cheney, of course, has vehemently defended waterboarding and other harsh techniques, insisting they elicited valuable intelligence and saved lives. He has also asked that several memoranda be declassified to prove his case. (The Daily Beast placed a call to Cheney’s office and will post a response if we get one.)

Without admitting where the suggestion came from, Duelfer revealed that he considered it reprehensible and understood the rationale as political—and ultimately counterproductive to the overall mission of the Iraq Survey Group, which was assigned the mission of finding Saddam Hussein’s WMD after the invasion.

“Everyone knew there would be more smiles in Washington if WMD stocks were found,” Duelfer said in the interview. “My only obligation was to find the truth. It would be interesting if there was WMD in May 2003, but what was more interesting to me was looking at the entire regime through the slice of WMD.”

But, Duelfer says, Khudayr in fact repeatedly denied knowing the location of WMD or links between Saddam’s regime and al Qaeda and was not subjected to any enhanced interrogation.

Duelfer says the idea that he would have known of such links was "ludicrous".

This proposed use of enhanced interrogation techniques, or torture, in Iraq was not the only time these methods were actually used to derive information for a purpose other than the stated one—to derive intelligence about imminent threats to the United States following the 9/11 attacks.

An [extensive analysis](#) I conducted as a reporter for NBC News of the 9/11 Commission's Final Report and its monograph on terrorist travel showed that much of what was reported about the planning and execution of the terror attacks on New York and Washington was based on the CIA's interrogations of high-ranking al Qaeda operatives who had been subjected to "enhanced interrogation techniques."

More than one-quarter of all footnotes in the 9/11 Report refer to CIA interrogations of al Qaeda operatives subjected to the now-controversial interrogation techniques. In fact, information derived from the interrogations was central to the 9/11 Report's most critical chapters, those on the planning and execution of the attacks.

The NBC analysis also showed—and agency and commission staffers concur—there was a separate, second round of interrogations in early 2004, specifically conducted to answer new questions from the 9/11 Commission after its lawyers had been left unsatisfied by the agency's internal interrogation reports.

Human-rights advocates, including Karen Greenberg of New York University Law School's Center for Law and Security and Michael Ratner of the Center for Constitutional Rights, have said that, at the least, the 9/11 Commission should have been more suspect of the information derived under such pressure.

Commission executive director Philip Zelikow (later counselor to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice) admitted, "We were not aware, but we guessed, that things like that were going on. We were wary...we tried to find different sources to enhance our credibility." (Zelikow testified before the Senate on Wednesday, May 13, that he had argued in a 2005 memo that some of the tactics used on suspected terrorists violated the constitutional ban on cruel and unusual punishment.)

A former senior U.S. intelligence official told me the Commission never expressed any concerns about techniques and even pushed for a second round of interrogations in early 2004, as the Commission was finishing up its work. The second round of interrogations sought by the Commission involved more than 30 separate interrogation sessions.

"Remember," the intelligence official said, "the Commission had access to the intelligence reports that came out of the interrogation. This didn't satisfy them. They demanded direct personal access to the detainees and the administration told them to go pound sand."

"As a compromise, they were allowed to let us know what questions they would have liked to ask the detainees. At appropriate times in the interrogation cycle, agency questioners would go back and re-interview the detainees. Many of [those] questions were variants or follow-ups to stuff previously asked."

At least four operatives whose interrogation figured in the 9/11 Commission Report have claimed that they told interrogators critical information as a way to stop being "tortured." Those claims came during their hearings in the spring of 2007 at the U.S. military facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

For Duelfer, an experienced interrogator, the details now being laid out in CIA and White House memoranda and in congressional hearings cannot be justified. While admitting that the interrogators faced enormous pressure in 2002 and 2003, he said he had problems with the overall strategy.

"Interrogation is about two humans who are face to face, sweat to sweat. Is your hand going to hit them?" he notes. "That's a relationship that becomes very deep. If you are going to reach someone at an intellectual or emotive level, it's hard to see how you can do that and still be the person who accosts that person. I don't know how to do that."

Robert Windrem is a Senior Reserach Fellow at the NYU Center on Law and Security. For three decades, he worked as a producer for NBC News. During that time, he focused on issues of international security, strategic policy, intelligence and terrorism. He is the winner of more than

40 national journalism awards for his work in print, television, and online journalism, including a Columbia-duPont Award, mostly for his work on international security issues.