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Keating, Vincent Charles

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American Allies Need to Actively Oppose

Trump’s Torture Policy

With President Trump we are in somewhat uncharted waters. Never has there been an American president who has been so forcefully pro-torture in the modern era. The domestic environment in which he will make this decision is also dangerously supportive of his views.
by VINCENT CHARLES KEATING

Throughout the 2016 presidential campaign, President Donald Trump openly supported the use of torture. At the beginning of the campaign, he argued that torture works, but even “if it doesn’t work, they deserve it anyway for what they do to us.” Later in the summer, he claimed that “I would bring back waterboarding, and I’d bring back a hell of a lot worse than waterboarding. We’re like a bunch of babies, but we’re going to stay within the laws. But you know what we’re going to do? We’re going to have those laws broadened. They say, what do you think about waterboarding? I said I like it a lot. I don’t think it’s tough enough. You have to fight fire with fire.”

Trump has not changed his position since becoming president. When his Defense Secretary, General James M. Mattis, surprised him by arguing, “give me a pack of cigarettes and a couple of beers and I do better with that than I do with torture,” Trump explained, “I’m not saying it changed my mind. Look we have people that are chopping off heads and drowning people in steel cages and we’re not allowed to waterboard.” Vice President Mike Pence kept the option open in a subsequent interview responding to criticism over the potential waterboarding policy, claiming that, “We’re going to have a president again who will never say what we’ll never do.”

Even in the few weeks since Trump has become president, there have been indications that this tough rhetoric might become policy. His choice for CIA deputy director oversaw a black site in Thailand where the CIA tortured high-value detainees. A leaked draft order would have forbidden the ICRC where the CIA tortured high-value detainees. A deputy director oversaw a black site in Thailand. Where the CIA tortured high-value detainees. A leaked draft order would have forbidden the ICRC from accessing detainees, and I’d bring back a hell of a lot worse than waterboarding. We’re like a bunch of babies, but we’re going to stay within the laws. But you know what we’re going to do? We’re going to have those laws broadened. They say, what do you think about waterboarding? I said I like it a lot. I don’t think it’s tough enough. You have to fight fire with fire.”

Permissive Domestic Conditions

The domestic conditions for President Trump to reinstate torture are quite permissive, particularly when set against the high international legal standard of “no exceptional circumstances whatsoever.” First, torture has become acceptable among the American public. An ICRC poll in December 2016 showed that 46% of Americans believed that torture could be used on an enemy combatant, with 30% opposing. Likewise, in a March 2016 poll, 63% of Americans claimed that torture is often or sometimes justified, and only 15% claimed that it is never justified – even though this is the prevailing legal position in international law. This is not a short-term phenomenon. Americans have consistently supported the use of torture in public opinion polls throughout Obama’s presidency. In fact, we can trace a steady increase in American support for torture, starting after the torture scandals of Abu Ghraib and the revelations of torture at CIA black sites in 2005 and 2006. As things stand, it is unlikely that President Trump will face serious consequences electorally should he decide to put torture back on the table.

Despite this grim outlook, a return to torture under the Trump administration is not a fait accompli. President Trump, like all politicians, faces political pressures that can either help or hinder him in going from idea to action. However, given the current political conditions domestically, it is particularly important that allies of the United States make it clear that the use of torture is not only unacceptable, but that it will damage the interests of the United States by putting intelligence- and military-cooperation at risk.

Institutionally, President Trump might have greater difficulty. The State Department and the US Armed Forces have traditionally been against removing Geneva Convention rights from detained prisoners. The CIA’s recent experience being investigated by the Senate over their role in torture during the Bush administration has also dissuaded some at the top of this organization to engage in torture again. Finally, certain members of Congress, particularly Senator John McCain, have come out vocally against even the possibility that torture be reinstated as an interrogation method.

On the other side of the coin, Trump has the ability to hire and fire those in the executive, and he has shown that he will get rid of anyone who publically speaks out against his wishes. Equally, while there are certainly members of Congress against the use of torture, there are also those, like Senator Tom Cotton, who have openly promoted its use.

So while Trump can certainly expect more political and legal resistance institutionally, this must be set against the general acceptance of torture among the American public. If this does not change, it will almost certainly affect more calculating politicians in their decisions to support or oppose Trump’s torture policy.

Importance of the American Allies

Given the relative permissive conditions domestically, it is therefore important that American allies play an active role in dissuading Trump from reinstating torture. The international community has certainly taken on this mantle before. In my own research, I found that many states were openly opposed to Bush’s use of torture and grew increasingly so between 2001 and 2008. This made cooperative efforts difficult. The CIA black site program, for instance, could only operate through constant diplomatic effort on the part of the United States and the transfer of large sums of money to black site hosting states. Even when the program was secret, cooperation was unstable. Once it came to light in 2006, the CIA found it almost impossible to maintain existing partners.

Unlike the Bush administration, Trump openly uses the word ‘torture,’ which is unambiguously in violation of the laws of armed conflict and international human rights law. There is thus an important role for US allies to be clear about their disapproval and to make the international diplomatic costs of using torture clear. But the way in which they should do this is not straightforward.

One of the big questions of the Trump administration is whether traditional name-and-shame techniques used by human rights NGOs, international organisations and foreign governments will have the same effect in a political environment where communitarian populism is much more pronounced. Openly criticising Trump for his torture policy, whether promoted or actually enacted, could lead to a rally-around-the-flag effect among his supporters, who are already primed for a president that will make the tough decisions and put America’s interests ahead of what foreign governments might want. If this is the case then a direct confrontation approach might not be as successful as it has been in the past.

Given this, there is an argument to be made that American allies need to be subtle but persistent over in their interactions with the Trump administration over torture. Statements such as those made by Angela Merkel, which reinforced cooperation based on “the dignity of each and every person,” combined with sustained closed door lobbying to emphasise the costs of lost cooperation, might be more important than open declarations of opposition to Trump’s plans. This is particularly the case since there is much to lose: the United States and their allies are partners in many military and intelligence-gathering operations, all of which would be at risk if Trump decides reinstates torture. Theresa May’s recent comments, which reinforced the UK position to not share intelligence with states practicing torture, is an example of what all American allies can do to make these costs clear.

Conclusion

With President Trump we are in somewhat uncharted waters. Never has there been an American president who has been so forcefully pro-torture in the modern era. The domestic environment in which he will make this decision is also dangerously supportive of his views. This suggests a clear role for American...
allies to help tip the scales against torture by putting pressure on the United States. However, the way in which this should be done is not as clear. It is very possible that the nature of Trump’s communitarian populist movement is such that open opposition to Trump and his policy might be less productive that it has been in the past. If this is the case, an approach that emphasises the benefits of cooperation contingent on torture being taken off the table might be the best strategy to keep Trump’s ideas from being turned into policy.

into the dark recesses of a new authoritarianism. Trump’s recent pronouncement that the United States government will use torture suggests that radical evil and an upsurge of lawlessness have once again taken hold in the United States. This is the ideological metrics of political zombies. A radical democracy demands a notion of educated hope capable of energising a generation of young people and others who connect the torture state to the violence and criminality of an economic system that celebrates its own depravities. It demands a social movement willing to abide by technological fixes or cheap reforms. It demands a new politics for which the word revolution means going to the root of the problem and addressing it non-violently with dignity, civic courage and the refusal to accept a future that mimics the present. Torture is not just a matter of policy, it is a deadening mindset, a point of identification, a form of moral paralysis, a war crime, an element of the spectacle of violence and it must be challenged in all of its dreadful registers.

Vincent Charles Keating
is an Assistant Professor in International Relations at the Center for War Studies, University of Southern Denmark. He has previously written on the international reaction to the Bush administration’s torture program in the International Journal of Human Rights and the British Journal of Politics and International Relations. His book, US Human Rights Conduct and International Legitimacy, traces how the Bush administration unsuccessfully challenged human rights international norms surrounding torture, habeas corpus and rendition.

Henry Armand Giroux
received his Doctorate from Carnegie-Mellon in 1977. He then became professor of education at Boston University from 1977 to 1983. In 1983 he became professor of education and renowned scholar in residence at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio where he also served as Director at the Center for Education and Cultural Studies. He moved to Penn State University where he took up the Waterbury Chair Professorship at Penn State University from 1992 to May 2004. He also served as the Director of the Waterbury Forum in Education and Cultural Studies. He moved to McMaster University in May 2004, where he currently holds the McMaster University Chair for Scholarship in the Public Interest.

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