



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

[fff@fff.org](mailto:fff@fff.org) [www.fff.org](http://www.fff.org)

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## **The Death of Rendition Victim Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi**

**by Andy Worthington**

From Libya comes news of [the death of Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi](#), a former “ghost prisoner” of the United States, whose false confession about a connection between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein — extracted under torture in Egypt — was used to justify the invasion of Iraq. The news will only add to the woes of the senior Bush administration officials who conceived the program of “extraordinary rendition” and torture within days of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and then, in a netherworld of secret memoranda, sought legal justification for their actions.

The fig leaf for the administration’s activities was the [Authorization for Use of Military Force](#), the founding document of the “war on terror,” passed by Congress in that first hectic, horrible week after the attacks, which authorized the president “to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons.”

Behind the scenes, however, an extraordinary amount of quasi-legal maneuvering — and the silencing or sidelining of critics in numerous government departments, the intelligence services, and branches of the military — was required in an attempt to cover up and justify a policy that actually involved a comprehensive flight from domestic and international law.

In the last six weeks, we have learned more than ever before about the extent of the Bush administration’s torture program, through revelations contained in a report by the International Committee of the Red Cross, based on interviews with 14 “high-value detainees” held in secret CIA prisons ([PDF](#)), in the [memos issued](#) by the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel in 2002 and 2005, which purported to justify the use of torture by the CIA, and in the Senate Armed Services Committee’s report on the treatment of prisoners in Afghanistan, Iraq and Guantánamo ([PDF](#)).

While the Obama administration — and, specifically, Attorney General Eric Holder — is still avoiding the most obvious response to this wealth of disturbing material, i.e., the appointment of a special prosecutor to investigate the whole sordid saga, former Vice President

[Dick Cheney](#) is still gobbling up airtime as though he were still in the White House. Yesterday, in an interview on CBS News' "Face the Nation," [he insisted](#) that information extracted through the use of what are euphemistically referred to as "harsh interrogation techniques" had saved "perhaps hundreds of thousands" of American lives.

Cheney has been on the attack since leaving office, but has stepped up his rhetoric since the OLC memos were released, recently calling for the release of other memos which, he claimed, would "show the success of the effort," and adding, "There are reports that show specifically what we gained as a result of this activity."

Whether Cheney's claims can be corroborated remains to be seen, but it is doubtful. In December, while he was defending his involvement in [the approval for the use of waterboarding](#) (a form of controlled drowning) on three "high-value detainees" — [Khalid Sheikh Mohammed](#), [Abu Zubaydah](#), and [Abdul Rahim al-Nashiri](#) — [Vanity Fair](#) published an article in which other informed sources explained to the journalist David Rose why they doubted such claims.

Disputing Cheney's claims that the interrogation of KSM had produced "a wealth of information," former FBI agent Jack Cloonan said, "The proponents of torture say, 'Look at the body of information that has been obtained by these methods.' But if KSM and Abu Zubaydah did give up stuff, we would have heard the details." Rose added that a former CIA officer asked, "Why can't they say what the good stuff from Abu Zubaydah or KSM is? It's not as if this is sensitive material from a secret, vulnerable source. You're not blowing your source but validating your program. They say they can't do this, even though five or six years have passed, because it's a 'continuing operation.' But has it really taken so long to check it all out?"

The most damning opinion, however, was offered by FBI director Robert Mueller:

I ask Mueller: So far as he is aware, have any attacks on America been disrupted thanks to intelligence obtained through what the administration still calls "enhanced techniques"? "I'm really reluctant to answer that," Mueller says. He pauses, looks at an aide, and then says quietly, declining to elaborate: "I don't believe that has been the case."

This was damaging enough, but three weeks ago, when the Senate report was published, it emerged that [an Army psychiatrist had told the committee](#) that "a large part of the time we were focused on trying to establish a link between al-Qaeda and Iraq," but that "we were not successful in establishing a link," and that, as a result, "there was more and more pressure to resort to measures that might produce more immediate results."

Following on from this revelation, astute observers recalled reports about the interrogations of two specific prisoners — Abu Zubayah and Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi — which had gained notoriety not because they had secured information that had saved "perhaps hundreds of thousands" of U.S. lives, but because they had resulted in false allegations about connections

between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein that were used to justify the invasion of Iraq, and that actually led to the loss of over 4,000 US lives, and the deaths of countless thousands of Iraqis.

David Rose revealed that Abu Zubaydah made a number of false confessions about connections between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda, including a claim that Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq) were working with Saddam Hussein to destabilize the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq. Rose added that a Pentagon analyst told him, “The intelligence community was lapping this up, and so was the administration, obviously. Abu Zubaydah was saying Iraq and al-Qaeda had an operational relationship. It was everything the administration hoped it would be.”

The analyst also explained that, at the time, no one was told that the information had been obtained through torture, and that, when this was eventually revealed, “I was so angry, knowing that the higher-ups in the administration knew he was tortured, and that the information he was giving up was tainted by the torture, and that it became one reason to attack Iraq.” He added, “It seems to me they were using torture to achieve a political objective.”

With Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi, the use of torture to extract a false confession about a connection between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein had an even more devastating effect. Seized by the Pakistani authorities in December 2001, as he crossed the border from Afghanistan into Pakistan, and then handed over to U.S. forces, al-Libi was rendered by the CIA to Egypt, where, under torture, he claimed that Saddam Hussein had offered to train two al-Qaeda operatives in the use of chemical and biological weapons.

This claim was used by Colin Powell, in his speech to the UN in February 2003, when the Secretary of State was attempting to drum up support for the invasion of Iraq, even though, as the [New York Times](#) revealed in 2005, the Defense Department’s own Defense Intelligence Agency had concluded, in February 2002, that al-Libi was “intentionally misleading” his interrogators.

Al-Libi withdrew his confession in February 2004, when he was returned to CIA custody, and as [Newsweek](#) reported in 2007, the circumstances of his “confession” could hardly have been less conducive to the discovery of the truth. As the magazine explained, he told his debriefers that “he initially told his interrogators that he ‘knew nothing’ about ties between Baghdad and Osama bin Laden and he ‘had difficulty even coming up with a story’ about a relationship between the two.” However, “his answers displeased his interrogators,” who then subjected him to a mock burial, imprisoning him for 17 hours in “a box less than 20 inches high.” When the box was opened, al-Libi “said he was given one final opportunity to ‘tell the truth.’ He was knocked to the floor and ‘punched for 15 minutes.’ It was only then that, al-Libi said, he made up the story about Iraqi weapons training.”

Few in the West will mourn al-Libi’s death in a Libyan prison, although legitimate questions may well be raised about whether he died, as the Libyan authorities stated, by committing suicide, or whether he was, in fact, murdered by Colonel Gaddafi’s regime. As the

emir of the Khaldan training camp, he, like his colleague Abu Zubaydah, was not a member of al-Qaeda, although it appears that he was committed to violent jihad against dictatorships in Muslim countries supported by the West — and, to some extent, to attacks on Western countries as well. However, after seven years of torture in Jordan, Egypt, and Libya, and in CIA prisons in Afghanistan and Poland, which seems, in the end, to have produced no intelligence of any value whatsoever, I can only wonder what genuinely useful information he might have provided had the FBI, which was initially involved in his questioning, been allowed to continue interrogating him without the use of torture.

In February 2005, veteran FBI agent Jack Cloonan told the [New Yorker](#)'s Jane Mayer that, after al-Libi's capture, the FBI had begun to build up "a good rapport" with al-Libi, after Cloonan told the agents in Afghanistan, "Do yourself a favor, read the guy his rights. It may be old-fashioned, but this will come out if we don't. It may take ten years, but it will hurt you, and the bureau's reputation, if you don't. Have it stand as a shining example of what we feel is right."

I also wonder how Dick Cheney is proposing to spin his way out of his involvement in a story that clearly seems to have demonstrated the very opposite of everything that he has claimed, and whether he will be called upon to answer an allegation made by Noman Benotman, an exiled opponent of the Gaddafi regime, who told *Newsweek* in 2007 that a senior Libyan official had told him that "the Libyan government has agreed not to publicly confirm anything about al-Libi — out of deference to the Bush administration." Benotman explained, "If the Libyans will confirm it, it will embarrass the Americans because he is linked to the Iraq issue."

*Andy Worthington is the author of [The Guantánamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in America's Illegal Prison](#) (published by Pluto Press) and serves as policy advisor to the Future of Freedom Foundation. Visit his website at: [www.andyworthington.co.uk](http://www.andyworthington.co.uk).*

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