

Torture report divides Republicans

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Six years after President Barack Obama took office, Republicans still find themselves haunted – and now divided — by George W. Bush’s legacy on terrorism.

A 600-page summary of Bush-era interrogation practices became the latest blast from the past to rattle the GOP, the work of Senate Intelligence Committee Democrats’ deep dive into the Central Intelligence Agency’s practices against enemy combatants during Bush’s tenure, including waterboarding and other techniques some members of both parties on Tuesday called torture.

But while Senate Democrats were united in defending the release of vivid details of CIA interrogations, Republicans were divided on multiple fronts, a reflection of the party’s evolving thinking on terrorist interrogations in the post-Bush era.

Incoming Intelligence Committee Chairman Richard Burr (R-N.C.) contended that “The only motive here could be to embarrass George W. Bush” and the current top Republican on the panel, retiring Sen. Saxby Chambliss (R-Ga.), said it’s “pretty clear” the report’s main purpose is to attack Bush.

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Yet Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) said the government should be more transparent and have a moral stance against torture. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), himself a victim of torture while a prisoner of war, supported the report’s release and criticized the CIA’s practices as having “damaged our security interests.”

South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), usually in step with McCain on national security issues, criticized the report’s release as timed to Democrats’ losing control of the Senate, rather than taking into account the global atmosphere. “The only thing I disagreed with: Don’t release it now because the world is on fire. I supported the investigation and I support making it public. I just think given the state of the world this is a bad time to do it,” Graham said.

Republicans on the committee released their own report Tuesday disputing several of the Democrats’ findings. Republican leaders, led by Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), spent Tuesday afternoon lambasting Democrats for putting out the intelligence investigation, arguing its only utility is to infuriate terrorists. Sen. Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.) said stridently that he’s “very supportive of enhanced interrogation.”

But other Republicans were more hesitant. Maine Sen. Susan Collins criticized the process behind the report’s development and release — namely the fact that no interviews of CIA officials were conducted — but came to the conclusion that “torture is wrong and fundamentally contrary to American values.”

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McCain praised Intelligence Chairwoman Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) for a “thorough and thoughtful study of practices that I believe not only failed their purpose ... but actually damaged our security interests.”

“The truth is sometimes a hard pill to swallow. It sometimes causes us difficulties at home and abroad. It is sometimes used by our enemies in attempts to hurt us. But the American people are entitled to it, nonetheless,” McCain said.

Graham agreed with McCain that the practices used by the CIA “were counterproductive” but found an opening to criticize the Obama administration’s policies on prosecuting terrorists that were absent from McCain’s floor remarks, which focused almost solely on the efficacy of torture.

“We have now gone from one extreme to the other. We’ve gone from waterboarding to reading Miranda Rights and providing taxpayer-funded lawyers to foreign terror suspects within days of capture,” Graham said in a statement. “The policies the Obama administration has employed treats terrorists as common criminals, not enemy combatants.”

([Also on POLITICO: Senate summary report—full text](#))

If there was one area where Republicans mostly stood together, it was on the politics of releasing the report.

“There is no reason whatsoever for this report to ever be published,” Chambliss said. “This is purely a partisan tactic. And a political one.”

Rather than offering a forceful defense of placing combatants in “stress positions,” Republicans instead attacked Democrats for dredging up Bush administration techniques during a political low-point for their party — at a cost of possibly endangering Americans serving overseas, either in combat roles or at embassies.

Burr said there was little new in the report besides exposing “our international partners” who helped with U.S. intelligence agencies abroad. GOP Sen. Mark Kirk of Illinois warned that “we may actually lose Americans now because of this report,” while Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.) said he was “at a loss” as to how the report could possibly enhance U.S. security, as it attacks Bush to serve as a political “distraction.”

“It’s already out there on the street, and for whatever reason Democrats felt like they needed to get it out there yet again,” said retiring Nebraska Sen. Mike Johanns, a former Bush secretary of Agriculture. “I worry about the cost. And I would side in favor of protecting Americans who are serving or people in other parts of the country that are working at our embassies.”

The partisan conflict, brewing for so many months, escalated quickly Tuesday. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid couldn’t resist tweaking Republicans for dropping out of the documents’ production process, taking the floor ahead of a marathon Feinstein speech to praise the “work done by Democrats on the Intelligence Committee. We’re here today ... because of their efforts.”

Democrats intimately involved with the report spent months engaged in a fierce back-and-forth with the CIA and the White House over how much of the report to redact, arguing that the CIA essentially wanted to make the report unreadable. Democrats said that Republicans are missing the point of the report by arguing it only dredged up aspects of Bush’s presidency, instead claiming that their findings will serve as a beacon for the future.

“Although President Obama ended the program by signing the Executive Order in 2009, any future president could reverse that order,” said Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.), an Intelligence Committee member and outspoken civil libertarian.

Even with their divisions, few other Republican senators joined Inhofe in his conclusion of backing techniques meticulously documented in the report, like 183 waterboarding sessions of Abu Zubaydah, a man largely believed to be behind the Sept. 11 attacks. And Republicans who have very different foreign policy views than the Bush administration trod carefully on the subject.

As he strolled to his Senate office, Paul declined to characterize the report as an attack on Bush like so many of his colleagues. Instead the Kentucky senator, who’s attempting to chart a less interventionist course for the GOP as he mulls a presidential run, expressed mixed feelings on the report’s release and what it says about the United States — a sharp break from his Kentucky colleague McConnell, who blasted Democrats’ work as “ideologically

motivated.”

“It’s important that people take a stand and representatives take a stand on whether they believe torture should be allowed. I think we should not have torture,” Paul said. “Transparency is mostly good for government. The only thing I would question is whether or not the actual details, the gruesomeness of the details, will be beneficial or inflammatory.”

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