

12 TO 16 BOTTLES, NOT 5

A number of you were discussing the report—from Lawrence Wilkerson and Robert Windrem—that we used water bottles when waterboarding.

In administering the Bush White House's most infamous "enhanced interrogation" procedure, waterboarding, CIA questioners employed a civilized tool for a brutal task—bottled water, sometimes straight from the fridge.

[snip]

A leading Bush administration official, retired Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, former chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell, says that the numbers associated with CIA waterboarding sessions—such as 183 times for 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and 83 times for al Qaeda training camp commander Abu Zubaydah—may even reflect the number of water bottles expended.

Windrem did a bit of fast math to figure out how many water bottles would have been used.

A one-pint water bottle takes about seven seconds to empty, so four or five bottles would take empty in 30 or 40 seconds, the time prescribed by the Justice Department memo approving the process. (Larger two-liter bottles might have been more efficient. Each takes a full 30 seconds to empty.)

At the risk being pedantic, I wanted to suggest this might not be the correct math. Windrem's using the description of waterboarding included in the Bybee Two memo. But we know from the May 30, 2005 memo that waterboarding, in practice, used more water than described in the Bybee Two memo.

"[T]he waterboard technique ... was different from the technique described in the DoJ opinion and used in the SERE training. The difference was the manner in which the detainee's breathing was obstructed. **At the SERE school and in the DoJ opinion, the subject's airflow is disrupted by the firm application of a damp cloth over the air passages; the interrogator applies a small amount of water to the cloth in a controlled manner. By contrast, the Agency Interrogator ... applied large volumes of water to a cloth that covered the detainee's mouth and nose.** One of the psychologists/interrogators acknowledged that the Agency's use of the technique is different from that used in SERE training because it is "for real--and is more poignant and convincing.") [my emphasis]

And a document submitted by JPRA in support of the Bybee Two memo (and described in the SASC report) gave a description of waterboarding that more closely resembled waterboarding as it was eventually practiced than it did the SERE technique it purportedly described (or the description that got into the Bybee Memo). It described the volume of water used as up to 1.5 gallons.

JPRA's description of the waterboarding technique provided in that first attachment was inconsistent in key respects from the U.S. Navy SERE school's description of waterboarding. According to the Navy SERE school's operating instructions, for example, while administering the technique, the Navy limited the amount of water poured on a student's face to two pints. However, the JPRA attachment said that "up to 1.5 gallons of water" may be poured onto a "subject's face."

Given that this may have been the instruction interrogators were using (and that we've had reports of waterboarding lasting far more than 40 seconds), it seems we might be talking about up to 16 bottles per waterboarding session: 1.5 gallon or 6 quarts or 12 pints or 16 12-ounce bottles.

Again, I don't mean to be pedantic, but with this math, we'd get much closer to matching the "pour" numbers of 183 and 83 to the number of waterboarding sessions that have been reported.