

OBAMA ISSUES VETO THREAT TO REVISED DETAINEE LANGUAGE

The Administration just released its position on the Defense Authorization, including a long passage on the new detainee language SASC devised the other day. That section reads:

Detainee Matters: The Administration objects to and has serious legal and policy concerns about many of the detainee provisions in the bill. In their current form, some of these provisions disrupt the Executive branch's ability to enforce the law and impose unwise and unwarranted restrictions on the U.S. Government's ability to aggressively combat international terrorism; other provisions inject legal uncertainty and ambiguity that may only complicate the military's operations and detention practices.

Section 1031 attempts to expressly codify the detention authority that exists under the Authorization for Use of Military Force (Public Law 107-40) (the "AUMF"). The authorities granted by the AUMF, including the detention authority, are essential to our ability to protect the American people from the threat posed by al-Qa'ida and its associated forces, and have enabled us to confront the full range of threats this country faces from those organizations and individuals. Because the authorities codified in this section already exist, the Administration does not believe codification is necessary and poses some risk. After a decade of settled jurisprudence on detention authority, Congress must be careful not to open a whole new series of legal

questions that will distract from our efforts to protect the country. While the current language minimizes many of those risks, future legislative action must ensure that the codification in statute of express military detention authority does not carry unintended consequences that could compromise our ability to protect the American people.

The Administration strongly objects to the military custody provision of section 1032, which would appear to mandate military custody for a certain class of terrorism suspects. This unnecessary, untested, and legally controversial restriction of the President's authority to defend the Nation from terrorist threats would tie the hands of our intelligence and law enforcement professionals. Moreover, applying this military custody requirement to individuals inside the United States, as some Members of Congress have suggested is their intention, would raise serious and unsettled legal questions and would be inconsistent with the fundamental American principle that our military does not patrol our streets. We have spent ten years since September 11, 2001, breaking down the walls between intelligence, military, and law enforcement professionals; Congress should not now rebuild those walls and unnecessarily make the job of preventing terrorist attacks more difficult. Specifically, the provision would limit the flexibility of our national security professionals to choose, based on the evidence and the facts and circumstances of each case, which tool for incapacitating dangerous terrorists best serves our national security interests. The waiver provision fails to address these concerns, particularly in time-sensitive operations in which law

enforcement personnel have traditionally played the leading role. These problems are all the more acute because the section defines the category of individuals who would be subject to mandatory military custody by substituting new and untested legislative criteria for the criteria the Executive and Judicial branches are currently using for detention under the AUMF in both habeas litigation and military operations. Such confusion threatens our ability to act swiftly and decisively to capture, detain, and interrogate terrorism suspects, and could disrupt the collection of vital intelligence about threats to the American people.

Rather than fix the fundamental defects of section 1032 or remove it entirely, as the Administration and the chairs of several congressional committees with jurisdiction over these matters have advocated, the revised text merely directs the President to develop procedures to ensure the myriad problems that would result from such a requirement do not come to fruition. Requiring the President to devise such procedures concedes the substantial risks created by mandating military custody, without providing an adequate solution. As a result, it is likely that implementing such procedures would inject significant confusion into counterterrorism operations.

The certification and waiver, required by section 1033 before a detainee may be transferred from Guantánamo Bay to a foreign country, continue to hinder the Executive branch's ability to exercise its military, national security, and foreign relations activities. While these provisions may be intended to be somewhat less restrictive than the

analogous provisions in current law, they continue to pose unnecessary obstacles, effectively blocking transfers that would advance our national security interests, and would, in certain circumstances, violate constitutional separation of powers principles. The Executive branch must have the flexibility to act swiftly in conducting negotiations with foreign countries regarding the circumstances of detainee transfers. Section 1034's ban on the use of funds to construct or modify a detention facility in the United States is an unwise intrusion on the military's ability to transfer its detainees as operational needs dictate.

Section 1035 conflicts with the consensus-based interagency approach to detainee reviews required under Executive Order No. 13567, which establishes procedures to ensure that periodic review decisions are informed by the most comprehensive information and the considered views of all relevant agencies. Section 1036, in addition to imposing onerous requirements, conflicts with procedures for detainee reviews in the field that have been developed based on many years of experience by military officers and the Department of Defense. In short, the matters addressed in these provisions are already well regulated by existing procedures and have traditionally been left to the discretion of the Executive branch.

Broadly speaking, the detention provisions in this bill micromanage the work of our experienced counterterrorism professionals, including our military commanders, intelligence professionals, seasoned counterterrorism prosecutors, or other operatives in the field. These professionals have successfully led a

Government-wide effort to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qa'ida and its affiliates and adherents over two consecutive Administrations. The Administration believes strongly that it would be a mistake for Congress to overrule or limit the tactical flexibility of our Nation's counterterrorism professionals.

Any bill that challenges or constrains the President's critical authorities to collect intelligence, incapacitate dangerous terrorists, and protect the Nation would prompt the President's senior advisers to recommend a veto.

The response is a mixed bag. I'm grateful that the President thinks it's a bad idea to have the military patrol our streets, particularly on days when a bunch of men who look and act like the military are cracking down on First Amendment activities.

But at the same time, one of the Administration's complaints here is that Congress wants to impose a definition of detainee on them, when they've had OLC do so already in secret. Given that the latter is probably more expansive, it seems that may be why they want to keep it that way.

So it's a stance against the increasing militarization of the courts. But a squishy self-serving one.