

DID BAD JOURNALISM MAKE THE COUNTRY LOVE TORTURE?

✖ One of the key takeaways of a study a number of people are buzzing about—showing that a majority of the country has generally opposed torture—is that six months after Obama became president, that changed.

Using a new survey dataset on torture collected during the 2008 election, combined with a comprehensive archive of public opinion on torture, we show here that a majority of Americans were opposed to torture throughout the Bush presidency. This stance was true even when respondents were asked about an imminent terrorist attack, even when enhanced interrogation techniques were not called torture, and even when Americans were assured that torture would work to get crucial information. Opposition to torture remained stable and consistent during the entire Bush presidency. Even soldiers serving in Iraq opposed the use of torture in these conditions. As we show in the following, a public majority in favor of torture did not appear until, interestingly, six months into the Obama administration.

The study itself (which suffers from some unfortunate biases, including its assumption that members of the military should be more supportive of torture) suggests that Dick Cheney's pro-torture media blitz might explain why torture became more popular once a purportedly anti-torture President took power.

There may be some truth to that. I wouldn't endorse it unquestioningly without some evidence to support it. But if it is true, it would serve as a lesson about the Obama Administration

strategy to avoid fighting for anything it believes in. That is, the study raises the possibility that—by ceding the field to PapaDick’s relentless pro-torture campaign—the Administration served to make its own stated policy less popular.

But as I said, that may not be the right lesson to take away from this.

The study argues that there has been a misperception about public support for torture and blames the chattering class for not being more skeptical of that misperception.

Our survey shows that nearly two-thirds of Americans overestimated the level of national support for torture. But more important, these misperceptions are not evenly distributed across the population. The more strongly an individual supports torture, the larger the gap in his or her perception. Those who believe that torture is “often” justified—a mere 15% of the public—think that more than a third of the public agrees with them. The 30% who say that torture can “sometimes” be justified believe that 62% of Americans do as well, and think that another 8% “often” approve of torture.

Revealingly, those people most opposed to torture—29% of the public—are the most accurate in how they perceive public attitudes on the topic. They overestimate the proportion of the public who “sometimes” approve of torture by 10%, underestimate the proportion of the public who “often” approve of torture by 10%, and perceive the rest of the public with near precision.

In short, these patterns present a classic pattern of false consensus. People who were most in favor of torture assumed that most of the public agreed

with them. While we obviously do not have survey data on Washington decision makers, we do know from public statements how leading voices such as former Vice President Dick Cheney felt about the interrogation techniques. These data show that it is not at all surprising that Cheney and other political figures believed that the public stood behind them. What is perhaps more surprising is how poorly journalists, regardless of personal belief regarding their objectivity or bias toward liberalism (Lee 2005), misread public sentiments.

I'd suggest one more possible factor. Couple this graph above—showing the beginning of a decline in opposition to torture in 2006-2007—with the details of the Harvard study showing how newspapers discussed waterboarding. At roughly the same time that torture began to be more accepted, newspapers started to treat waterboarding, at least, with their typical “he said, she said” cowardice.

Before 2007, the NY Times had only scattered articles quoting others. However, beginning in 2007, there is a marked increase in articles quoting others, primarily human rights groups and lawmakers. Human rights representatives predominate during the first half of the year. However, beginning in October, politicians were cited more frequently labeling waterboarding torture. Senator John McCain is the most common source, but other lawmakers also begin to be cited. By 2008, the articles' references are more general such as “by many,” or “many legal authorities.” Stronger phrases such as “most of the civilized world” also begin to appear.

The LA Times follows a similar pattern. In 2007, this paper mostly quoted human

rights groups and Sen. McCain. Beginning in 2008, however, more general references began to be used, such as “by many” and “critics.”

That is, starting around the same time support for torture increased, the press started treating it as one more political debate.

Remember, before 2007, newspapers largely uncritically adopted the Bush Administration’s Orwellian language about enhanced interrogation, without including voices that called waterboarding torture. That said, even while it deployed such propaganda (and the newspapers willingly adopted it), the Administration itself always maintained that it did not torture. But as time has passed, former Bush officials (led by PapaDick and his spawn BabyDick) have gotten closer and closer to shifting the argument to a admission, coupled with a defense, of torture.

Is it possible, then, that by embracing the torture apologists’ relativism, newspapers encouraged individuals to think about torture as a political preference?

This is all obviously speculation on my part. But it seems to me the most important question raised by this study on public opinion about torture is why under a then-popular nominally anti-torture president, torture became popular.