

# Lawyers' Statement on Bush Administration's Torture Memos

TO: President George W. Bush  
Vice President Richard B. Cheney  
Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld  
Attorney General John Ashcroft  
Members of Congress

This is a statement on the memoranda, prepared by the White House, Department of Justice, and Department of Defense, concerning the war powers of the President, torture, the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of August 12, 1949, and related matters. The Administration's memoranda, dated January 9, 2002, January 25, 2002, August 1, 2002 and April 4, 2003, ignore and misinterpret the U.S. Constitution and laws, international treaties and rules of international law. The lawyers who approved and signed these memoranda have not met their high obligation to defend the Constitution.

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Americans have faith that our government respects the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, laws passed by Congress, and treaties which the United States has signed. We have always looked to lawyers to protect these rights. Yet, the most senior lawyers in the Department of Justice, the White House, the Department of Defense, and the Vice President's office have sought to justify actions that violate the most basic rights of all human beings.

The memoranda prepared and approved by these lawyers:

- ▶ Claim a power for the President as Commander-in-Chief to choose to ignore laws, treaties and the Constitution regarding the treatment of prisoners. (DOD memo, April 4, 2003).
- ▶ Advise the President that he has the authority to approve the infliction of extreme physical and mental distress by defining "torture" so narrowly as to exclude all but treatment that is "equivalent in intensity to the pain accompanying serious physical injury, such as organ failure, impairment of bodily function, or even death." According to the Administration's memoranda, mental pain or suffering does not amount to torture unless "it results in significant psychological harm of significant duration, e.g., lasting for months or even years." (DOJ memo, August 1, 2002). This memo was reportedly prepared in order to provide legal bases and defenses for harsh methods already used by the CIA, in the event that CIA agents were prosecuted for violation of the federal anti-torture statutes.
- ▶ Assert the permissibility of the use of mind-altering drugs that do not "disrupt profoundly the sense of personality." According to the memorandum: "By requiring that the procedures and the drugs create a profound disruption, the statute requires more than that the acts 'forcibly separate' or 'rend' the senses or personality. Those acts must penetrate to the core of an individual's ability to perceive the world around him, substantially interfering with his cognitive abilities, or fundamentally alter his personality." (DOJ memo, August 1, 2002).
- ▶ Advise the President that despite concerns raised by the Department of State, the U.S. is exempt from compliance with the Geneva Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War with respect to the war in Afghanistan. (See White House Counsel Memo, January 25, 2002). This argument ignores that the treaty, by its own terms, governs all conflicts "at any time and in any place whatsoever," and protects even unlawful combatants who do not qualify as prisoners of war from "humiliating and degrading treatment" and "mutilation, cruel treatment and torture." (Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Aug. 12, 1949, art. 3 para. 1). As stated by Attorney General John Ashcroft, the purpose of claiming an exemption from the Geneva Convention was to provide American intelligence, military and law enforcement personnel with a defense to charges relating to "field conduct, detention conduct or

interrogation of detainees” that is prohibited by the Geneva Convention. (Letter to the President, Feb. 1, 2002).

- ▶ Contrived defenses by distorting definitions of “necessity,” “self-defense,” and “superior orders” in order to avoid independent responsibility for actions that would violate the U.S. Army Field Manual and relevant statutory and case law. (DOJ memo, August 1, 2002; DOD memo, April 4, 2003).

These memoranda and others like them seek to circumvent long established and universally acknowledged principles of law and common decency. The memoranda approve practices that the United States itself condemns in its annual Human Rights Report. No matter how the memoranda seek to redefine it, torture remains torture. The belated repudiation of the August 2002 memorandum (which had been signed by Jay S. Bybee, then Assistant Attorney General, Office of Legal Counsel and now a Federal Judge) is welcome, but the repudiation does not undo the abuses that this memorandum may have sanctioned or encouraged during the nearly two years that it was in effect. The subsequent repudiation, coming after public outcry, confirms its original lawless character.

Moreover, the claim that the President’s authority as Commander-in-Chief allows him to ignore laws, treaties, and the Constitution relevant to human rights, and thereby to shield those acting on his authority who violate domestic and international law by their interrogation methods and other behavior, directly contradicts several major Supreme Court decisions, numerous statutes passed by Congress and signed by Presidents, and specific

provisions of the Constitution itself. One of the surprising features of these legal memoranda is their failure to acknowledge the numerous sources of law that contradict their own positions, such as the Steel Seizure Case, *Youngstown Sheet and Tube Co. v. Sawyer*, 343 U.S. 579 (1952). The unprecedented and under-analyzed claim that the Executive Branch is a law unto itself is incompatible with the rule of law and the principle that no one is above the law.

The lawyers who prepared and approved these memoranda have failed to meet their professional obligations. A lawyer has a duty both to ask his or her client what the client wants to do and assist the client in accomplishing his or her lawful objectives. But the lawyer has a simultaneous duty, as an officer of the court and as a citizen, to uphold the law. Enforcement of all of our laws depends on lawyers telling clients not only what they can do but also what they can not do. This duty binds all lawyers and especially lawyers in government service. Their ultimate client is not the President or the Central Intelligence Agency, or any other department of government but the American people. When representing all Americans, government lawyers must adhere to the Constitution and the rule of law. In fact, government lawyers take the following oath: “I . . . do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States...”

Conscientious leaders of the Department of Justice and lawyers in other governmental agencies have always striven to meet that standard. But some of those currently occupying senior legal positions in this Administration in this instance have abandoned this standard. They have counseled individuals to ignore the law and offered arguments to minimize their exposure to sanction or liability for doing so.

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While the facts cited above are established, much, however, is still not known, for the Administration refuses to produce other memoranda and documents relating to treatment of prisoners and detainees. We therefore:

- (1) Call upon the Administration to release all memoranda relating to such treatment and on Congress to require their production if they are not released; and
- (2) Call for an appropriate inquiry into how and why such memoranda were prepared and by whom they were approved, and whether there is any connection between the memoranda and the shameful abuses that have been exposed and are being investigated at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad and at other military prisons.

Sincerely,

{The undersigned}

**Bruce Ackerman**

*Sterling Professor of Law and Political Science, Yale University*

**Mark D. Agrast**

*Senior Vice President for Domestic Policy, Center for American Progress*

**Anthony G. Amsterdam**

*Judge Edward M. Weinfeld Professor of Law, New York University*

**Phillip Anderson**

*Past President, American Bar Association*

**Nan Aron**

*President, Alliance for Justice*

**Frank Askin**

*Distinguished Professor, Rutgers Law School*

**Jack M. Balkin**

*Knight Professor of Constitutional Law and the First Amendment, Yale Law School*

**Martha Barnett**

*Past President, American Bar Association*

**David A. Barrett**

*Partner, Boies Schiller & Flexner LLP*

**Joan Z. “Jodie” Bernstein**

*former Director, Bureau of Consumer Protection*

**Richard I. Beattie**

**Hon. Anthony C. Beilenson**  
*former Member of the United States House of Representatives*

**Barbara Black**

*Professor of Law and former Dean, Columbia Law School*

**Hon. Birch Bayh**

*former United States Senator*

**John Charles Boger**

*Professor of Law, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Law*

**Brooksley Born**

*former Chairperson of U.S. Commodity Futures Trading Commission, Clinton Administration*

**Elizabeth Cabraser**

**George F. Carpinello**

**Douglass W. Cassel, Jr.**

*Director of Center for International Human Rights and Clinical Professor, Northwestern University School of Law*

**William Coblenz**

**David Cole**  
*Professor of Law, Georgetown University*

**Michael A. Cooper**

*Past President, Association of the Bar of the City of New York*

**Edward Correia**

*former Special Counsel to President Clinton on Civil Rights*

**Joseph W. Cotchett**

**Hon. Mario Cuomo**  
*former Governor of New York*

**John C. Curtin, Jr.**

*Past President, American Bar Association*

**Dennis E. Curtis**

*Clinical Professor of Law Emeritus, Yale Law School*

**Talbot “Sandy” D’Alemberte**

*Past President, American Bar Association*

**James Danaher**

*Palo Alto, CA*

**Norman Dorsen**

*Stokes Professor of Law and Counselor to the President, New York University*

**John W. Douglas**

*Past President, District of Columbia Bar*

**Father Robert F. Drinan**

*Professor of Law, Georgetown University and former Member of the U.S. House of Representatives*

**Peter Edelman**

*Professor of Law, Georgetown University*

**Hon. Don Edwards**

*former Member of the United States House of Representatives*

**Eugene R. Fidell**

*Feldesman Tucker Leifer Fidell LLP*

**Hon. Lee Fisher**

*former Attorney General of Ohio*

**Lawrence Fox**

*Partner, Drinker Biddle & Reath LLP*

**Monroe H. Freedman**

*Howard Lichenstein Distinguished Professor of Legal Ethics, Hofstra University School of Law*

**Leon Friedman**

*Joseph Kushner Distinguished Professor of Civil Liberties Law, Hofstra University School of Law*

**Michael S. Frisch**

*Ethics Counsel and Adjunct Professor of Law, Georgetown University Law Center*

**Hon. John J. Gibbons**

*retired Chief Judge, United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit*

**Lawrence S. Goldman**

*Immediate Past President, National Association of Criminal Defense Attorneys*

**Robert W. Gordon**

*Chancellor Kent Professor of Law and Professor of History, Yale University*

**Scott Greathead**

**Patricia M. Gruber**

**Jennifer Harbury**  
*President, Unitarian Universalist Service Association*

**Mark I. Harrison**

*Past President, State Bar of Arizona*

**Robert E. Hirshon**

*Past President, American Bar Association*

**Nancy Hollander**

*Past President, National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers*

**Scott Horton**

*President, International League for Human Rights*

**Zona Hostetler**

**Hon. Shirley Hufstедler**

*former Circuit Judge, United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit*

**Simon Lazarus**

*Public Policy Counsel, National Senior Citizens’ Law Center*

**David Isbell**  
*Past President, District of Columbia Bar*

**Robert D. Joffe**

**Hon. Nathaniel C. Jones**  
*retired Circuit Judge, United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit*

**Lewis B. Kaden**

**Yale Kamisar**  
*Clarence Darrow Distinguished University Professor of Law Emeritus and Professor of Law Emeritus, University of Michigan Law School*

**Robert H. Kapp**

**Pamela Karlan**  
*Professor of Law, Stanford University*

**Hon. Robert Kastenmeier**  
*former Member of the United States House of Representatives*

**Nicholas Katzenbach**  
*former U.S. Attorney General, Johnson Administration*

**John Keker**

**David E. Kendall**

**Victor A. Kovner**  
*Former Corporation Counsel, City of New York*

**Sheldon Krantz**

**Albert J. Krieger**  
*Past President, National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers*

**Simon Lazarus**  
*Public Policy Counsel, National Senior Citizens' Law Center*

**Lisa Lerman**  
*Professor of Law and Director, Law & Public Policy Program, Catholic University Law School*

**Robert E. Litan**  
*First Deputy Assistant Attorney General for Antitrust and Associate Director of Office of Management and Budget, Clinton Administration*

**Goodwin Liu**  
*Acting Professor of Law, Boalt Hall School of Law at University of California-Berkeley*

**Robert MacCrate**  
*Past President, American Bar Association*

**Patrick Macrory**

**Joseph D. Mandel**  
*Vice Chancellor for Legal Affairs, University of California Los Angeles, Past President of Los Angeles County Bar Association*

**Timothy G. Massad**

**Gay McDougal**  
*Executive Director, Global Rights*

**Harry McPherson**  
*Former White House Counsel, Johnson Administration*

**Tedson Meyers**

**Abner J. Mikva**  
*former Circuit Judge, United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit*

**Cheryl Mills**  
*Deputy White House Counsel, Clinton Administration*

**Hon. E. Leo Milonas**  
*former Chief Administrative Judge of the State of New York and Associate Chief Justice, Appellate Division of the Supreme Court of New York and Immediate Past President, Association of the Bar of the City of New York*

**Martha L. Minow**  
*William Henry Bloomberg Professor of Law, Harvard Law School*

**Irvin B. Nathan**  
*former Principal Associate Deputy Attorney General, Clinton Administration*

**Ralph G. Neas**  
*President, People for the American Way*

**Gregory T. Nojeim**  
*Associate Director, American Civil Liberties Union Washington National Office*

**Hon. William A. Norris** *retired*  
*Circuit Judge, United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit*

**Joseph Onek**  
*former Principal Associate Deputy Attorney General, Clinton Administration*

**Myron Orfield**  
*Associate Professor of Law and Director, Institute on Race and Poverty, University of Minnesota Law School*

**Hon. Stephen M. Orlofsky**  
*former District Judge, United States District Court for the District of New Jersey*

**Alexander Papachristou**

**John Payton**  
*Past President, District of Columbia Bar*

**Robert M. Pennoyer**  
*former Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Eisenhower Administration*

**John H. Pickering**  
*Past President, District of Columbia Bar Association*

**Michael Posner**  
*Executive Director, Human Rights First*

**Llewelyn G. Pritchard**

**Bruce Rabb**

**Drucilla S. Ramey**  
*former Executive Director and General Counsel, San Francisco Bar Association*

**Michael Ratner**  
*President, Center for Constitutional Rights*

**Norman Redlich**  
*Counsel, Wachtell Lipton Rosen & Katz and former Dean, New York University School of Law*

**Judith Resnik**  
*Arthur Liman Professor of Law, Yale Law School*

**Hon. Cruz Reynoso**  
*former Justice, California Supreme Court*

**William L. Robinson**  
*founding Dean and Professor of Law, University of the District of Columbia David A. Clarke School of Law*

**Anthony D. Romero**  
*Executive Director, American Civil Liberties Union*

**Kenneth Roth**  
*Executive Director, Human Rights Watch*

**Leonard S. Rubenstein**  
*Executive Director, Physicians  
for Human Rights*

**Stephen A. Saltzburg**  
*Wallace and Beverly Woodbury  
University Professor, George  
Washington University Law  
School*

**Barry C. Scheck**  
*President, National Association  
of Criminal Defense Lawyers*

**Patricia Schroeder**  
*former Member of the U.S.  
House of Representative*

**Herman Schwartz**  
*Professor of Law, American  
University Washington College  
of Law*

**Irwin H. Schwartz**

**Hon. William S. Sessions**  
*former Chief Judge, United  
States District Court for the  
Western District of Texas,  
former FBI Director, 1987-1993*

**John Shattuck**  
*former Assistant Secretary of  
State for Human Rights*

**Hon. Felice K. Shea**  
*former Justice, New York State  
Supreme Court*

**Jerome S. Shestack**  
*Past President, American Bar  
Association*

**Virginia E. Sloan**  
*Founder and President, The  
Constitution Project*

**William Reece Smith, Jr.**  
*former President, American Bar  
Association*

**Neal R. Sonnett**  
*Chair, ABA Task Force on  
Treatment of Enemy Combatants*

**Marvin Stender**

**Jon B. Streeter**  
*President, San Francisco Bar  
Association*

**Nadine Strossen**  
*President, American Civil  
Liberties Union*

**Jim Sturdevant**  
*President, Consumer Attorneys  
of California*

**William L. Taylor**  
*Chairman, Citizens' Commission  
on Civil Rights*

**William W. Taylor, III**  
*Partner, Zuckerman Spaeder,  
LLP*

**Hon. Kathleen Kennedy  
Townsend**  
*former Lieutenant Governor of  
Maryland*

**Lawrence Tribe**  
*Carl M. Loeb University  
Professor, Harvard University*

**Marna Tucker**  
*Past President, District of  
Columbia Bar*

**Hon. Harold S. Tyler, Jr.**  
*former U.S. Deputy Attorney  
General, Ford Administration  
and former District Court Judge,  
U.S. District Court for the  
Southern District of New York*

**Steven T. Walther**  
*former Chair and current  
Executive Board Member,  
American Bar Association  
Center for Human Rights and  
former Chair, ABA Standing  
Committee on World Order  
Under Law*

**Charles S. Warren**  
*Board Chair, New York League  
of Conservation Voters*

**James D. Weill**  
*Chair, Alliance for Justice*

**Thomas B. Wilner**  
**Judith A. Winston**  
*former General Counsel and  
Undersecretary, United States  
Department of Education,  
Clinton Administration*

**Ellen Yaroshefsky**  
*Professor of Law and Director  
of Jacob Burns Ethics Center,  
Benjamin N. Cardozo School of  
Law at Yeshiva University*