

WALTER PINCUS' CHUMMY TORTURE APOLOGY

This is the kind of lede you'd expect from a dirty hippie blogger, not from a septuagenarian TradMed journalist.

Who other than the acerbic John A. Rizzo, who served a long tenure as the CIA's acting general counsel, would use his first talk after retiring from government to lay out a series of ironies that illustrate the frustration felt by older agency professionals, given the treatment of their activities during the past decade?

Rather than focusing on the details John Rizzo revealed that slightly advanced the story of the investigation into the John Adams Project, Pincus chooses to uncritically air Rizzo's complaints about torture. Pincus doesn't even challenge Rizzo's claim that there is an irony to the way CIA has been treated.

Which is a pity, because Rizzo made some downright absurd comments. Take Rizzo's complaint about the shock over the number of times Abu Zubaydah and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed were waterboarded.

He pointed out that while Zayn al-Abidin Muhammed Hussein, better known as Abu Zubaida, and Khalid Sheik Mohammed were undergoing waterboarding in CIA detention, the United States was conducting lethal operations against terrorists. "There was never, ever, as far as I could discern, any debate, discussion, questioning on moral or legal grounds about the efficacy of the United States targeting and killing terrorists," he said.

"A lot of attention, a lot of criticism was given about the number of waterboarding sessions they [Abu Zubaida and Mohammed] had," Rizzo said, "but I don't believe there would have been nearly as much similar discussion about the number of bullets that would have been pumped into them if they had been killed rather than captured."

The shock over the revelation that Abu Zubaydah was waterboarded 83 times and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed 183 times in a month doesn't just stem from the claims John Yoo made—based on representations from Rizzo—that waterboarding was not torture. The shock also stems from the divergence between CIA-sponsored disinformation that waterboarding worked immediately, after just one use, and the reality that CIA used it over and over and over. Which in turn leads to questions of efficacy—and to the inaptness of Rizzo's comparison. You pump someone full of bullets and each bullet adds just one more piece of certainty that the objective—the neutralization or death of the target—is accomplished. But when you waterboard someone an 83rd time, does it advance the objective—purportedly collecting reliable information—in the least? In the case of Abu Zubaydah, whose 83 waterboardings seem to have yielded in just 10 pieces of useful intelligence, the answer appears to be no. Indeed, in a memo addressed to and based on information from John Rizzo, John Yoo wrote,

Moreover, you have also orally informed us that although some of these techniques may be used with more than once, that repetition will not be substantial because the techniques generally lose their effectiveness after several repetitions.

[snip]

You have indicated that these acts will not be used with substantial repetition,

so that there is no possibility that severe physical pain could arise from such repetition.

There's no irony here! John Rizzo (and the lawyers from the Counterterrorism Center who contributed to this memo) either lied to John Yoo about the number of times waterboarding would be used, or CIA itself failed to meet the terms of this memo. And poor John Rizzo thinks the public is wrong to be shocked at the result.

All of which details might be appropriate to mention in an article about Rizzo's self-indulgent claims of irony. But they don't appear in this article.