

BILL KELLER SUPPRESSES AMERICAN TRADITION OF OPPOSITION TO TORTURE

When asked by NYT's own media reporter about the NYT's refusal to use the word torture, Bill Keller could barely exert himself to say more than the official press statement. Here's what the spokesperson gave to Michael Calderone.

A spokesman told Yahoo! News that the paper "has written so much about the waterboarding issue that we believe the Kennedy School study is misleading." However, the Times acknowledged that political circumstances did play a role in the paper's usage calls. "As the debate over interrogation of terror suspects grew post-9/11, defenders of the practice (including senior officials of the Bush administration) insisted that it did not constitute torture," a Times spokesman said in a statement. "When using a word amounts to taking sides in a [political dispute](#), our general practice is to supply the readers with the information to decide for themselves. Thus we describe the practice vividly, and we point out that it is denounced by international covenants and **in American tradition** as a form of torture." [my emphasis]

And here's what Keller gave NYT's Brian Stelter.

Bill Keller, the executive editor of The Times, said the newspaper has written so much about the issue of waterboarding that, "I think this Kennedy School study – **by focusing on whether we have**

embraced the politically correct term of art in our news stories – is somewhat misleading and tendentious.”

In an e-mail message on Thursday, Mr. Keller said that defenders of the practice of waterboarding, “including senior officials of the Bush administration,” insisted that it did not constitute torture.

“When using a word amounts to taking sides in a political dispute, our general practice is to supply the readers with the information to decide for themselves,” Mr. Keller wrote. “Thus we describe the practice vividly, and we point out that it is denounced by international covenants and **human rights advocates** as a form of torture. **Nobody reading The Times’ coverage could be ignorant of the extent of the practice (much of that from information we broke) or mistake it for something benign (we usually use the word ‘brutal.’)**” [my emphasis]

I guess all you need to do to be Executive Editor of the NYT is to bandy about insults like “politically correct” and “tendentious” and drop all acknowledgment that not just human rights advocates—but American tradition (notably, the tradition propagated by the NYT until the US embraced torture as official policy)—considers waterboarding torture.

Which is all the more pathetic, given that Bill Keller himself was once part of that tradition. As NYTPicker notes, NYT reporter Bill Keller has a long history of referring to torture as torture without bowing to the spin of the governments who use it.

On February 18, 1987, a 38-year-old NYT reporter named Bill Keller published his first story about torture.

The young Moscow correspondent – who,

two years later, would win the Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Soviet Union – referred to “the torture case” in writing eloquently about revelations that officials in Petrozavodsk, in the Karelian republic, had been fired in the wake of torture accusations.

[snip]

Keller went on to write more than a dozen stories for the NYT – from the Soviet Union and, later, South Africa – that referenced interrogation techniques as “torture.” His stories never alluded to any questioning of the term by the governments that used the techniques.

[snip]

In applying a different standard to the NYT’s coverage of waterboarding, Keller has betrayed a reprehensible weakness in the face of his own government’s stance on torture – one that he never showed in his years as a courageous and straightforward reporter.

I’m not sure whether the difference in approach makes reporter Bill Keller nothing more than a human rights activist or makes editor Bill Keller tendentious, but along the way, NYT Executive Editor Bill Keller appears to have actively suppressed an American tradition that treats torture as torture, regardless of who uses it.