

THE OSAMA BIN LADEN TRAIL SHOWS WATERBOARDING DIDN'T WORK

The AP has confirmed that intelligence leading to the courier that in turn led to Osama bin Laden came from Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and—as I surmised earlier—Abu Faraj al-Libi while in CIA custody. But partly because of the language AP uses to describe this—and partly because the wingnuts love torture—many are drawing the wrong conclusion about it. Here's what the AP says:

Current and former U.S. officials say that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, provided the nom de guerre of one of bin Laden's most trusted aides. The CIA got similar information from Mohammed's successor, Abu Faraj al-Libi. Both were subjected to harsh interrogation tactics inside CIA prisons in Poland and Romania.

Note what AP says: KSM provided the courier's nom de guerre. The CIA got similar information from al-Libi. And they were tortured. The AP does not say torture led to this information.

Here's what a senior administration official said last night about when they got the intelligence on the courier.

Detainees gave us his nom de guerre or his nickname and identified him as both a protégé of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of September 11th, and a trusted assistant of Abu Faraj al-Libbi, the former number three of al Qaeda who was captured in 2005.

Detainees also identified this man as one of the few al Qaeda couriers trusted

by bin Laden. They indicated he might be living with and protecting bin Laden. But for years, we were unable to identify his true name or his location.

Four years ago, we uncovered his identity, and for operational reasons, I can't go into details about his name or how we identified him, but about two years ago, after months of persistent effort, we identified areas in Pakistan where the courier and his brother operated. [my emphasis]

In other words, while the CIA may have learned the courier's nickname earlier, they didn't learn his true name until "four years ago"—so late 2006 at the earliest. And they didn't learn where the courier operated until around 2009.

From these dates we can conclude that either KSM shielded the courier's identity entirely until close to 2007, or he told his interrogators that there was a courier who might be protecting bin Laden early in his detention but they were never able to force him to give the courier's true name or his location, at least not until three or four years after the waterboarding of KSM ended. That's either a sign of the rank incompetence of KSM's interrogators (that is, that they missed the significance of a courier protecting OBL), or a sign he was able to withstand whatever treatment they used with him.

With al-Libi, the connection between whatever torture he experienced and this intelligence is less clear (since he was first detained in 2005), but even with al-Libi, it appears clear he either never revealed the courier's real name or only did so after he had been in custody for a year, and almost certainly until after he arrived in Gitmo.

Update: Putting the AP's reporting here together with the DAB, it seems like al-Libi did give up the name, perhaps earlier than reported. But still not waterboarding.

Either these men didn't know the true name of their protégé and assistant (which is highly unlikely), or they managed to withhold that information even under torture.

In fact, two people who normally would be crowing about the success of torture are not now doing it. Donald Rumsfeld suggests the discovery of OBL came from intelligence gained at Gitmo (therefore, not in Poland or Romania). And while Cheney assumes enhanced interrogation aka torture led to OBL, he admits he doesn't know where the intelligence came from; given that he was ordering up propaganda reports along the way to justify his torture program, yet can't claim definitively that the intelligence came from it, is a pretty good tell that he can't say it did.

If KSM and al-Libi revealed details about the courier (and al-Libi's Gitmo file suggests he did; KSM's, which is dated two years earlier, does not), they shielded the most important information about him for years.

All of which sort of makes you wonder whether the FBI's KSM expert could have gotten it out of KSM had he ever interrogated him.