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The WikiLeaks That Show Enhanced Interrogation Worked

Marc A. Thiessen

In his new memoir, *In My Time,* former Vice President Dick Cheney declares that the CIA's enhanced interrogation program "provided intelligence that enabled us to prevent attacks and save lives" as well as important intelligence "we relied on to find [Osama] bin Laden." The evidence backing Cheney's claims is overwhelming—as is the tenacity of those who continue to deny it. Former CIA director Michael Hayden has compared these CIA "deniers" to "'birthers' who, even in the face of clear contrary evidence, take as an article of faith that President Obama was not born in the United States" and "9/11 'truthers' who, despite all evidence to the contrary…persist in claiming that 9/11 was a Bush Administration plot."

If the CIA "deniers" won't accept the word of the former vice president, and the four CIA directors who have testified that CIA interrogations produced invaluable intelligence, perhaps they will believe WikiLeaks. Earlier this year, WikiLeaks released a trove of documents it dubbed the "Gitmo Files." I doubt it was WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's intent to provide still additional evidence of the effectiveness of CIA interrogations, but that is precisely what his "Gitmo Files" do.

Take, for example, the file WikiLeaks released on the results of the interrogations of Abu Faraj al-Libi—one of the three key CIA detainees who

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helped the agency identify Osama bin Laden's courier, who in turn led the CIA to bin Laden. The document describes Abu Faraj as the "communications gateway" to bin Laden who after undergoing CIA interrogation "reported on al-Qai'da's methods for choosing and employing couriers, as well as preferred communications means." Based on intelligence obtained from Abu Faraj and other CIA detainees, it states that "in July 2003, [Abu Faraj] received a letter from [bin Laden's] designated courier" in which "[bin Laden] stated [Abu Faraj] would be the official messenger between [bin Laden] and others in Pakistan." The file also notes another vital piece of information: To better carry out his new duties "in mid-2003, [Abu Faraj] moved his family to Abbottabad"—the city where bin Laden's courier lived and where bin Laden eventually met his end. It continues that Abu Faraj "worked between Abbottabad and Peshawar" passing messages for bin Laden. And the file reveals that "in mid-April 2005, [Abu Faraj] began arranging for a store front to be used as a meeting place and drop point for messages he wanted to exchange" with bin Laden's courier and was captured while waiting to meet him.

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The raid against bin Laden's compound took place just days after WikiLeaks released this document containing sensitive details of what the CIA knew about bin Laden's courier. While there is no way to know if the WikiLeaks release caused the administration to speed up the raid, this much is clear: if al-Qaeda leaders had read the WikiLeaks file on Abu Faraj before the bin Laden operation was carried out, the terrorists would have been alerted to the fact that (a) the CIA was on the trail of bin Laden's courier, and (b) the agency had made the connection between the couri-

er, bin Laden, and Abbottabad. In other words, WikiLeaks may very nearly have blown the operation that killed Osama bin Laden.

In addition to these details about the intelligence the CIA obtained from detainees on bin Laden's courier networks, the Gitmo Files also describe intelligence CIA detainees provided that led to the disruption of a number of planned post-9/11 terrorist attacks.

For example, the documents describe Khalid Shaikh Mohammed's plan for an "11 September–style attack against Heathrow airport." The plan involved "crashing numerous airplanes into Heathrow, with a secondary explosion immediately outside the airport as a diversion." They note that "the operation was put on hold upon [Mohammed's] arrest in February 2003"—an arrest that was made possible by information the CIA obtained from two other captured terrorists, Abu Zubaydah and Ramzi Binalshibh.

After being taken into CIA custody and undergoing enhanced interrogation, Mohammed "provided information on the operatives he chose to participate in the attack. . . . There were two primary cells for the attack: the United Kingdom based cell, tasked to obtain pilot training from a commercial flight school in Kenya; and a Saudi Arabia based cell, tasked to identify martyr candidates to assist in the aviation attack." The CIA used this and other information Mohammed provided to capture dozens of such "martyr candidates" the agency did not know about before the interrogation.

The WikiLeaks documents also describe another planned attack against America after 9/11: a plot by Mohammed to send two operatives into the United States to blow up apartment buildings in Chicago using natural gas. The documents describe how, "in early 2002," al-Qaeda operative Binyam Mohamed and Jose Padilla met with Mohammed "to discuss future operations in the US." The documents report that Mohammed "directed Padilla to travel to Chicago, rent an apartment, and initiate a natural gas explosion to cause the building to collapse. [Mohammed] told [Binyam] to join Padilla in Chicago on this mission." They further describe a send-off dinner Mohammed hosted for the two terrorists in Pakistan, during which "[Mohammed] handed Padilla $5,000 USD and exchanged email addresses. [Mohammed] wished Padilla and Binyam good luck and left." Padilla was captured on arrival at Chicago's O'Hare Airport thanks to information the CIA obtained from Abu Zubaydah, while Binyam "was

captured during his attempt to travel to the US," thus disrupting the Chicago plot. (Incredibly, Padilla, who is currently serving a 17-year sentence on unrelated terror charges, is suing former Justice Department official John Yoo in civil court for damages relating to his detention. Meanwhile Binyam Mohamed has been released from Guantánamo Bay and is now living in England, where he has received millions from the British government in compensation for sending him to Gitmo.)

The files released by WikiLeaks also detail an al-Qaeda plot "to carry out simultaneous attacks in Karachi against the U.S. consulate, western residences, and westerners at the local airport." The documents note that "in September 2002, [Khalid Shaikh Mohammed] revamped the Karachi operation targeting the U.S. consulate and brought in Walid bin Attash to work with [Ammar al-Baluchi]." The plot was disrupted because "on the day [Baluchi] and Walid bin Attash were supposed to receive the explosives, they were both arrested"—thanks to information the CIA obtained from Mohammed following the application of enhanced interrogation techniques. Had it been carried out, this plot could have replicated the destruction caused by al-Qaeda's bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.
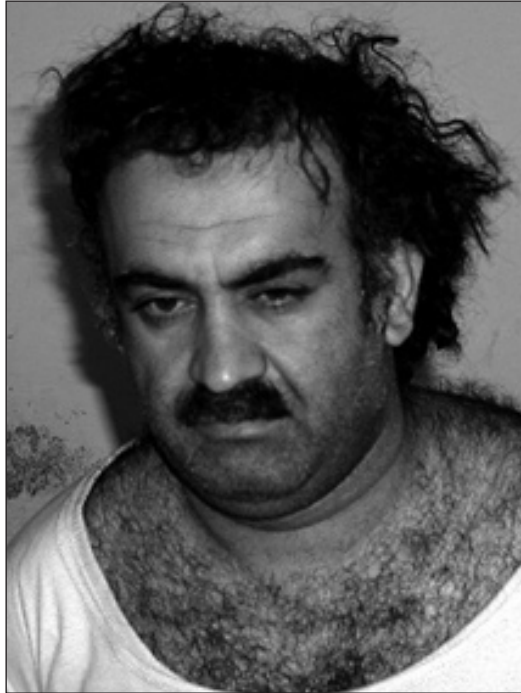
WikiLeaks' Gitmo files also describe a planned attack on the US Marine camp in Djibouti. After being taken into CIA custody, an East African al-Qaeda operative named Hassan Guleed admitted to the CIA that he was "in the progress [*sic*] of planning terrorist operations against U.S. coalition personnel and assets in Camp Lemonier," the Marine base in Djibouti. He told the agency that "in October 2003, the operatives identified a dark red Isuzu water tank truck that delivered water to Camp Lemonier. Subsequently, in December 2003 they agreed on a plan to target Camp Lemonier with an explosives laden water truck. While operatives still needed to secure funding, a string of arrests in 2004 and September 2005 disrupted the operation." It was information Guleed provided the CIA that made those arrests possible. Had al-Qaeda succeeded in carrying out this attack, it could have rivaled the deadly 1983 bombing of the US Marine barracks in Beirut.

The Gitmo Files describe how the mastermind of the USS *Cole* attack, Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, ran a network of terror operatives in

parallel to the networks oper-
ated by Khalid Shaikh Moham-
med. According to the docu-
ments released by WikiLeaks,
"Abu Zubaydah reported that
[Nashiri] is an al-Qaida opera-
tive who reported directly to [bin
Laden]. Abu Zubaydah stated
detainee headed his own al-Qaida
group comprising most Saudis
and Yemenis, which was respon-
sible for conducting operations
outside Afghanistan, similar to
[Mohammed]."

The documents note that
"From at least April 2001, detainee
directed maritime and land-based
terrorist attacks, many targeting US
military interests, to include…a
plot to sink a US warship or tanker

US Department of Defense

Khalid Shaikh Mohammed in 2003

in the Strait of Hormuz…; a plot using an explosive-filled airplane against
western warships in Port Rashid, Dubai…; a plot to blow up the U.S.
embassy in Sana, [Yemen]; and a disrupted maritime operation targeting
US, United Kingdom (UK), and other NATO ships and submarines in the
Strait of Gibraltar."

With regard to this last operation, the documents note that Nashiri
"advised the operatives that he had personally chosen the UK military base
in Gibraltar to be the target for the operation" and "provided the opera-
tives $10,000 USD for living and preliminary operational expenses and
instructed them to conduct extensive surveillance of the base….Once
the surveillance report and operational plans were complete, [Nashiri]
was to submit the report to [bin Laden] for final approval." After the
plan was disrupted, "in May or June 2002, [Mohammed] learned of the
disrupted plan to attack the military base in Gibralter and was upset with
[Nashiri] as [Mohammed] had no idea any such planning was underway
or that any operatives had been directed to Morocco in support of any
such plan…. (Analyst Note: This demonstrates [Nashiri] operated sepa-
rately within al-Qaida from [Mohammed's]…operations)."

The documents also state that Abu Zubaydah told the CIA that Nashiri and Mohammed "had a plan for another attack in the US after 11 September 2001. He noted that the plan was blessed by [bin Laden] sometime after the 9/11 operations. Abu Zubaydah stated that, in his opinion, [bin Laden] wanted the impact of this attack to be greater than those of 11 September 2001." Nashiri was captured in November 2002 and taken into CIA custody, where he underwent enhanced interrogation and subsequently provided information that helped shut down his network's terrorist operations.

WikiLeaks' Gitmo Files also describe an al-Qaeda cell that was developing anthrax for attacks against the US. After enhanced interrogation, Mohammed admitted that a Jemmah Islamiyah (JI) terrorist named Hambali had "told Ayman al-Zawahiri, [bin Laden's] second in command, that JI member Yazad [*sic*] Sufaat could assist in a biological weapons program." According to the documents, Hambali "introduced Yazid Sufaat to Zawahiri in 2001.... The purpose of the meeting was for Zawahiri to assess Sufaat's general knowledge of biology and laboratory skills." Apparently Sufaat passed the test.

Using information provided by Mohammed and other CIA detainees, the CIA tracked down and captured Hambali. He then told the agency that "by late July or early August 2001, both Muhammad Atif and Ayman Zawahiri had met with Sufaat and gave their endorsement of the program." The WikiLeaks documents note, "Yazid Sufaat stayed at [Mohammed's] house. Sufaat told [Mohammed] that he was developing anthrax for al Qaida and was training two students, Abu Bakr al-Filistini and al-Hud al-Sudani." He told Mohammed that he was "happy in his work" and that "as al-Qaida was leaving Afghanistan [following the 9/11 attacks], Yazid planned to reconstitute the anthrax program in Pakistan."

In December 2001, Yazid Sufaat was captured. At the time, the CIA did not know about his role in the anthrax program or the existence of his two accomplices, who were still at large. They learned this information only in 2003, when Mohammed was taken into custody and provided information which allowed them to confront Sufaat about the anthrax program. When presented with the information Mohammed had provided, Sufaat was angry that Mohammed had betrayed him, but admitted his role and identified his two lieutenants. This information from Mohammed and Sufaat then allowed the CIA to capture Sufaat's two assistants and take them off the streets—shutting down this al-Qaeda anthrax cell.

The Gitmo Files also reveal information about al-Qaeda operative Ahmed Ghailani. Earlier this year, Ghailani was acquitted of 284 of 285 counts in his civilian trial for the bombings of US embassies in East Africa. As the charges for the murder of Ghailani's victims were read aloud in court, one by one, each time the jury foreman announced the verdict: "not guilty...not guilty...not guilty." He was convicted on just one count of conspiracy to destroy government property. As former Attorney General Michael Mukasey put it after Ghailani's acquittals, "To take someone who murdered [more than 200] people and to convict him of conspiring to destroy government property is a cruel travesty."

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Ghailani got off because his defense lawyers managed to convince a civilian jury that their client was an "innocent, naive boy [who] was fooled by his friends" and had no idea he was involved in an al-Qaeda plot to attack two US embassies. The WikiLeaks documents tell a different story. According to the documents, Ghailani told US officials "that approximately three days before the attack he had assumed that the US embassies would be the targets." In other words, Ghailani knew he was involved in a plot to blow up two US embassies. He was not a dupe. He was not "fooled by his friends." By his own admission, he knew exactly what he was doing.

Moreover, after his success in East Africa, Ghailani became a hero in the jihadist ranks and rose quickly in al-Qaeda. According to the WikiLeaks documents, "In mid 2001, after [Ghailani] served as a bodyguard and cook for [bin Laden], he received training in document forgery. From mid 2001, until his capture in 2004, [Ghailani] functioned as one of the only

document forgers for al-Qaida in Pakistan. While in Pakistan [Ghailani] worked with senior al-Qaida lieutenants assisting departing mujahedeen and their families with travel to their home countries." During CIA questioning, Mohammed "said [Ghailani] was an expert in document forgery and a trusted associate, although the quality of his work was average."

While he cannot be tried again for the 1998 embassy bombings, Ghailani can still be tried for these and other crimes. Indeed, before Ghailani was transferred to the civilian court system, military prosecutors at Guantánamo were preparing a broad array of charges against Ghailani—until Attorney General Eric Holder took the case out of their hands. Ghailani should be returned to Guantánamo—the forum where he belonged in the first place—to face justice for his terrorist activities after the embassy bombings.

There is much more in the WikiLeaks documents. But despite the overwhelming weight of this and other information, the CIA "deniers" continue to dismiss the effectiveness of the agency's terrorist interrogation program. The reason they are so insistent is because they know that if they admit the truth—that CIA interrogations really did play a critical role in stopping these plots and leading us to Osama bin Laden—then their case against the program will be dramatically weakened.

This is more than a historical argument. Twice during President Obama's first term in office, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), has succeeded in getting bombs onto planes headed for the United States. In December 2009, this network nearly succeeded in blowing up Northwest Airlines Flight 253 as it prepared to land in Detroit, Michigan. Disaster was averted only because the bomb malfunctioned. Less than one year after the attempted attack in Detroit, AQAP penetrated our defenses a second time—this time getting two package bombs aboard planes headed for the United States, timed to blow up over the eastern seaboard. Disaster was averted only because of a last-minute tip from Saudi intelligence that allowed us to track down the explosives before they went off.

By the Obama administration's own admission, it was completely unaware that AQAP had developed the capability or intent to attack us here in America. Notwithstanding the successful drone strike that killed

Anwar al-Awlaki, the fact is that since 2008, the United States has carried out just fourteen drone strikes against al-Qaeda in Yemen. During that same period, by contrast, the US has carried out 258 drone strikes against al-Qaeda in Pakistan, operations that have killed fifty-six senior leaders and hundreds of mid- and lower-level operatives. Why have there been so many successful strikes against al-Qaeda in Pakistan but so few in Yemen? Clearly the United States has much greater insight into the location and operations of al-Qaeda in South Asia than it does on the Arabian Peninsula. The reason we have so little information about this virulent new terror network is that, unlike in the period immediately after 9/11, the United States is no long capturing and interrogating high-value terrorists who could tell us about their plans to attack the homeland. President Obama shut down the CIA interrogation program with an executive order. That order could be rescinded by his successor with the stroke of a pen. Which means the debate over the effectiveness and necessity of enhanced inter-rogation is far from over.

As that debate continues, the critics of enhanced interrogation are free to argue on moral grounds that America should not have employed the techniques used by the CIA despite their effectiveness. That is a legitimate position, and a matter on which reasonable people could disagree. But they are not free to argue that the techniques did not work. Dick Cheney is right. The CIA interrogation program did produce valuable intelligence that stopped attacks and saved lives.

Just ask WikiLeaks. ◉