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FROM THE
DIRECTOR OF
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Bin Laden Raid Revives Debate on Value of Torture

By [SCOTT SHANE](#) and [CHARLIE SAVAGE](#)

WASHINGTON — Did brutal [interrogations](#) produce the crucial intelligence that led to the killing of [Osama bin Laden](#)?

As intelligence officials disclosed the trail of evidence that led to the compound in Pakistan where Bin Laden was hiding, a chorus of Bush administration officials claimed vindication for their policy of “enhanced interrogation techniques” like [waterboarding](#).

Among them was [John Yoo](#), a former Justice Department official who wrote secret legal memorandums justifying brutal interrogations. “[President Obama](#) can take credit, rightfully, for the success today,” Mr. Yoo [wrote Monday](#) in National Review, “but he owes it to the tough decisions taken by the Bush administration.”

But a closer look at prisoner interrogations suggests that the harsh techniques played a small role at most in identifying Bin Laden’s trusted courier and exposing his hide-out. One detainee who apparently was subjected to some tough treatment provided a crucial description of the courier, according to current and former officials briefed on the interrogations. But two prisoners who underwent some of the harshest treatment — including [Khalid Shaikh Mohammed](#), who was waterboarded 183 times — repeatedly misled their interrogators about the courier’s identity.

The discussion of what led to Bin Laden’s demise has revived a national debate about torture that raged during the Bush years. The former president and many conservatives argued for years that force was necessary to persuade Qaeda operatives to talk. Human rights advocates, and Mr. Obama as he campaigned for office, said the tactics were torture, betraying American principles for little or nothing of value.

Glenn L. Carle, a retired [C.I.A.](#) officer who oversaw the interrogation of a high-level detainee in 2002, said in a phone interview Tuesday, that coercive techniques “didn’t provide useful, meaningful, trustworthy information.” He said that while some of his colleagues defended

the measures, “everyone was deeply concerned and most felt it was un-American and did not work.”

Obama administration officials, intent on celebrating Monday’s successful raid, have tried to avoid reigniting a partisan battle over torture.

“The bottom line is this: If we had some kind of smoking-gun intelligence from waterboarding in 2003, we would have taken out Osama bin Laden in 2003,” said Tommy Vietor, spokesman for the [National Security Council](#). “It took years of collection and analysis from many different sources to develop the case that enabled us to identify this compound, and reach a judgment that Bin Laden was likely to be living there.”

From the moment the first Qaeda suspects were captured, interrogators at both the military’s prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and the C.I.A.’s secret prisons were focused on identifying Qaeda members who served as couriers.

“We knew that it was likely that if we were ever to get Osama bin Laden, it would be because we somehow came upon somebody closely associated with him that he trusted,” said Charles D. Stimson, the top Pentagon official on detainee affairs from 2004 to 2007.

In 2002 and 2003, interrogators first heard about a Qaeda courier who used the nom de guerre Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, but his name was just one tidbit in heaps of uncorroborated claims.

After the capture in March 2003 of Mr. Mohammed, the chief planner of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, he was subjected to the most harrowing set of the so-called enhanced measures, which included slamming prisoners into walls, shackling them in stress positions and keeping them awake for as long as 180 hours. Like two other prisoners, he was subjected to waterboarding.

According to an American official familiar with his interrogation, Mr. Mohammed was first asked about Mr. Kuwaiti in the fall of 2003, months after the waterboarding. He acknowledged having known him but said the courier was “retired” and of little significance.

In 2004, however, a Qaeda operative named Hassan Ghul, captured in Iraq, gave a different account of Mr. Kuwaiti, according to the American official. Mr. Ghul told interrogators that Mr. Kuwaiti was a trusted courier who was close to Bin Laden, as well as to Mr. Mohammed and to [Abu Faraj al-Libi](#), who had become the operational chief of [Al Qaeda](#) after Mr. Mohammed’s capture.

Mr. Kuwaiti, Mr. Ghul added, had not been seen in some time — which analysts thought was a possible indication that the courier was hiding out with Bin Laden.

The details of Mr. Ghul's treatment are unclear, though the C.I.A. says he was not waterboarded. The C.I.A. asked the Justice Department to authorize other harsh methods for use on him, but it is unclear which were used. One official recalled that Mr. Ghul was "quite cooperative," saying that rough treatment, if any, would have been brief.

Armed with Mr. Ghul's account of the courier's significance, interrogators asked Mr. Mohammed again about Mr. Kuwaiti. He stuck to his story, according to the official.

After Mr. Libi was captured in May 2005 and turned over to the C.I.A., he too was asked. He denied knowing Mr. Kuwaiti and gave a different name for Bin Laden's courier, whom he called Maulawi Jan. C.I.A. analysts would never find such a person and eventually concluded that the name was Mr. Libi's invention, the official recalled.

Again, the C.I.A. has said Mr. Libi was not waterboarded, and details of his treatment are not known. But anticipating his interrogation, the agency pressured the Justice Department days after his capture for a new set of legal memorandums justifying the most brutal methods.

Because Mr. Mohammed and Mr. Libi had both steered interrogators away from Mr. Kuwaiti, C.I.A. officials concluded that they must be protecting him for an important reason.

"Think about circles of information — there's an inner circle they would protect with their lives," said an American official who was briefed on the C.I.A. analysis. "The crown jewels of Al Qaeda were the whereabouts of Bin Laden and his operational security."

The accumulating intelligence about Mr. Kuwaiti persuaded C.I.A. officials to stay on his trail, leading to the discovery of his real name — which American officials have not disclosed — and whereabouts. He in turn unwittingly led the agency to Bin Laden's lair, where Mr. Kuwaiti and his brother were among those who died in Monday's raid.

Before a day had passed, the torture debate had flared. The chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, Representative **Peter T. King**, Republican of New York, told Fox News that the success of the hunt for Bin Laden was due to waterboarding. The next morning, Senator **Dianne Feinstein**, Democrat of California and chairwoman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said just as flatly that "none of it came as a result of harsh interrogation practices."

David Rohde contributed reporting from New York.

