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Report Shows Tight C.I.A. Control on Interrogations

By SCOTT SHANE and MARK MAZZETTI

WASHINGTON — Two 17-watt fluorescent-tube bulbs — no more, no less — illuminated each cell, 24 hours a day. White noise played constantly but was never to exceed 79 decibels. A prisoner could be doused with 41-degree water but for only 20 minutes at a stretch.

The Central Intelligence Agency's secret interrogation program operated under strict rules, and the rules were dictated from Washington with the painstaking, eye-glazing detail beloved by any bureaucracy.

The first news reports this week about hundreds of pages of newly released documents on the C.I.A. program focused on aberrations in the field: threats of execution by handgun or assault by power drill; a prisoner lifted off the ground by his arms, which were tied behind his back; another detainee repeatedly knocked out with pressure applied to the carotid artery.

But the strong impression that emerges from the documents, many with long passages blacked out for secrecy, is by no means one of gung-ho operatives running wild. It is a portrait of overwhelming control exercised from C.I.A. headquarters and the Department of Justice — control Bush administration officials say was intended to ensure that the program was safe and legal.

Managers, doctors and lawyers not only set the program's parameters but dictated every facet of a detainee's daily routine, monitoring interrogations on an hour-by-hour basis. From their Washington offices, they obsessed over the smallest details: the number of calories a prisoner consumed daily (1,500); the number of hours he could be kept in a box (eight hours for the large box, two hours for the small one); the proper time when his enforced nudity should be ended and his clothes returned.

The detainee "finds himself in the complete control of Americans; the procedures he is subjected to are precise, quiet and almost clinical, " noted one document.

The records suggest one quandary prosecutors face as they begin a review of the C.I.A. program, part of the larger inquiry into abuse cases ordered Monday by Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. Any prosecution that focuses narrowly on low-level interrogators who on a few occasions broke the rules may appear unfair, since most of the brutal treatment was authorized from the White House on down.

"The documents underscore how closely supervised the program was by officials in Washington," said Jameel Jaffer of the American Civil Liberties Union, whose Freedom of Information Act lawsuit forced disclosure of the records. "Any investigation that began and ended with the so-called rogue interrogators would be completely inadequate."

A 2004 background paper the C.I.A. sent to the Justice Department gives the fullest account to date of the oversight of every step that followed the capture of a man suspected of being a top member of Al Qaeda — an HVD, in agency parlance, for high-value detainee.

Brought to the "black site" in diapers, the paper says, the prisoner's head and face were shaved, he was stripped and photographed and sleep deprivation and a diet limited to Ensure Plus, a dietary drink, began.

"The interrogators' objective," the background paper says, "is to transition the HVD to a point where he is participating in a predictable, reliable and sustainable manner." The policy was to use the "least coercive measure" to achieve the goal. The harsh treatment began with the "attention slap," and for three prisoners of the nearly 100 who passed through the program, the endpoint was waterboarding.

Waterboarding might be an excruciating procedure with deep roots in the history of torture, but for the C.I.A.'s Office of Medical Services, recordkeeping for each session of near-drowning was critical. "In order to best inform future medical judgments and recommendations, it is important that every application of the waterboard be thoroughly documented," said medical guidelines prepared for the interrogators in December 2004.

The required records, the medical supervisors said, included "how long each application (and the entire procedure) lasted, how much water was used in the process (realizing that much splashes off), how exactly the water was applied, if a seal was achieved, if the naso- or oropharynx was filled, what sort of volume was expelled, how long was the break between applications, and how the subject looked between each treatment."

When the doctors gauged what a drenching in a cold cell might do to a prisoner, they did their research, consulting a textbook entitled "Wilderness Medicine," in particular Chapter 6 on "accidental hypothermia," as well as a Canadian government pamphlet, "Survival in Cold Waters," according to footnotes.

Lawyers at the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel, likewise, were immersed in the details of investigations.

A week before he completed the first major legal opinion that authorized the use of physical pressure, John C. Yoo, the national security specialist in the counsel's office, was faxed a six-page C.I.A. "psychological assessment" of the first man the brutal methods would be used on, Abu Zubaydah. "Subject is a highly self-directed individual who prizes his independence," the assessment said.

In 2004, when Daniel B. Levin, then the acting assistant attorney general in the counsel's office, sent a letter to the C.I.A. reauthorizing waterboarding, he dictated the terms: no more than two sessions of two hours each, per day, with both a doctor and a psychologist in attendance. In 2007, Steven G. Bradbury, then in charge of the office, wrote a two-page letter simply to extend the authorization for use of a particular technique — its name is redacted — for an extra day, until "1700 E.S.T., November 8, 2007."

Tom Parker, policy director for counterterrorism and human rights at Amnesty International USA, said the documents were "chilling."

"They show how deeply rooted this new culture of mistreatment became," he said.

But defenders of the program say the tight rules show the government's attempt to keep the program within the law. "Elaborate care went into figuring out the precise gradations of coercion," said David B. Rivkin Jr., a lawyer who served in the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. "Yes, it's jarring. But it shows how both the lawyers and the nonlawyers tried to do the right thing."

As leaks about the program led to public accusations of torture, court rulings and Congressional action, the paperwork flowing between nervous C.I.A. and Justice officials steadily grew.

In June 2006, the Supreme Court ruled that prisoners who were members of Al Qaeda were entitled to the Geneva Conventions' protections against humiliating and degrading treatment, and "outrages on personal dignity." John A. Rizzo, the C.I.A.'s top lawyer, asked the Justice Department whether treatment at the agency's secret prisons passed that test.

Mr. Bradbury of the Office of Legal Counsel wrote a 14-page response, assuring the agency that none of the conditions — the blindfolding and shackling, the involuntary shaving and the white noise — violated the Geneva Conventions' standards.

"These are not conditions that humans strive for," Mr. Bradbury wrote. "But they do reflect the realities of detention, realities that the Geneva Conventions accommodate, where persons will have to sacrifice some measure of privacy and liberty while under detention."

Soon the assurances were no longer necessary. Worries about the legality of the C.I.A. program had reached the highest levels of the Bush administration. Two weeks after Mr. Bradbury sent his letter, President George W. Bush emptied the prisons, ordering the C.I.A.'s remaining 14 prisoners transferred to the American military's detention center at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.