



House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, shown during a news conference earlier this month, said last week she had been briefed on 'enhanced interrogation' of terrorism suspects but was not aware at the time that waterboarding, or simulated drowning, was being practiced.

(Haraz N. Ghanbari/AP)

Who attended 'torture' briefings? A GOP lawmaker wants to know.

Rep. Peter Hoekstra seeks full disclosure about who on Capitol Hill knew about US interrogation methods – a move that may put certain Democrats on the spot.

By [Gail Russell Chaddock](#) | Staff writer/ April 27, 2009 edition

Washington

President Obama's decision to make public four Bush-era memos authorizing "enhanced interrogation techniques" of terrorist suspects is now putting key Democrats on the spot, too.

The top Republican on the House intelligence committee is calling for the release of the names all members of Congress briefed on these techniques, as well as the substance of those briefings.

The practice during the Bush years was to restrict highly classified intelligence oversight hearings to the so-called gang of eight – that is, the party leaders of both the House and Senate (speaker of the House, Senate majority leader, and minority leaders of the House and Senate), as well as the chairman and ranking minority-party members of the House and Senate intelligence panels. But attendance at these briefings varied. Republicans want clarification on who, exactly, attended the briefings, what they knew, and what they found out, and what they did about it.

In a bid to get a "full and accurate picture," Rep. Peter Hoekstra (R) of Michigan released Monday the [text of a letter to the Director of National Intelligence](#) calling for a full and accurate list of members who were briefed on the issue. The list provided to date is "incomplete and inaccurate," he wrote.

Bipartisan support for methods?

It's the latest volley in an escalating controversy over US use of techniques that some have deemed torture. Republicans, including former Vice President Dick Cheney, say the complete record will show bipartisan support for techniques that helped to keep Americans safe. Democrats say it's a bid to shift blame for torture away from the Bush administration to them, then the minority party, though they had little power to block it.

"After all, we were in the minority then. We couldn't have stopped it," said a Democratic aide, speaking on background.

Hoekstra's letter

The Hoekstra letter to DNI Dennis Blair, dated April 24, said the public needs to know what these members knew and when they knew it, including the release of the Central Intelligence Agency's reports on the substance of the briefings and the names of all who attended.

"Since the documents already in the possession of the Committee clearly indicate that careful records were kept with respect to these briefings by the CIA, it is difficult to understand the delay in receiving a full and complete accounting," the congressman wrote. "These documents should be provided immediately, and Congress is clearly entitled to records of its own briefings."

If the documents are not released, the DNI must ensure that they are preserved, he added. "Serious question would arise if any such briefing records were destroyed or unavailable for review by the Committee."

The rules of classified briefings

On both sides of the aisle, lawmakers' aides are scrambling to document responses to these briefings from within their own ranks. To date, Rep. Jane Harman (D) of California is [on record as objecting](#) early on to use of these interrogation techniques, as is Sen. John Rockefeller IV (D) of West Virginia.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said last week that she had been briefed on enhanced interrogation but was not aware at the time that waterboarding, or simulated drowning, was being practiced. Speaking broadly about classified briefings she had received as the top Democrat on the House intelligence panel, Ms. Pelosi said lawmakers could not disclose such material, even if they wanted to.

"When you are briefed on something, it isn't your information to share with anybody else," Pelosi said at a roundtable organized by The Christian Science Monitor on April 22. "Whether they are briefing you on legal opinions or they're briefing you on actions they are taking, you have no ability to share that information with anybody else. Even if I wanted to share, I would not have had the liberty to share," she said.

A too-quiet protest?

But a former CIA director and a one-time chair of the House intelligence panel challenges that account of events. In an op-ed in The Washington Post on Saturday, retired Rep. Porter Goss (R) of Florida wrote that lawmakers briefed about waterboarding and other enhanced interrogation techniques "gave the CIA our bipartisan support."

"I do not recall a single objection from my colleagues. They did not vote to stop authorizing CIA funding. And for those who now reveal filed 'memorandums for the record' suggesting concern, real concern should have been expressed immediately – to the committee chairs, the briefers, the House speaker or minority leader, the CIA director or the president's national security adviser – and not quietly filed away in case the day came when the political winds shifted. And shifted they have," he added.

Moreover, critics say, members of Congress who were in the know had options they did not pursue.

"It's a revealing argument in that it sheds light on the mind-set of congressional leaders," says Steve Aftergood, director of the Project on Government Secrecy with the Federation of American Scientists in Washington. "They feel at a disadvantage and comparatively powerless. Are they in fact powerless? Arguably, the answer is no. They have tools at their disposal that they have not used."

He adds: "Those [tools] include use of funding restrictions as leverage to gain more information, to increase oversight, or, in extreme cases, to terminate dubious or illegal operations. None of those steps were taken with waterboarding."

Human rights advocates echo his sentiment.

“I’m not sure that, even with more authority, Congress would have done more,” says Michael Ratner, president of the Center for Constitutional Rights, a human rights group that advocates for the rights of Guantánamo detainees. “They did not take full advantage of the authority they had.”