

TODAY SHOW INTERVIEW WITH JOHN KIRIAKOU

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Matt Lauer interview with former CIA agent John Kiriakou

Reporting by Andrea Mitchell

MATT LAUER, co-host: Now to the CIA under fire today. Did it try to cover up the harsh tactics used to get al-Qaeda suspects to talk? NBC's chief foreign affairs correspondent Andrea Mitchell has more on that.

Andrea, good morning to you.

ANDREA MITCHELL, reporting: Good morning, Matt. Congress will start grilling the CIA today about why it destroyed hours, hundreds of hours, in fact, of videotapes of interrogations and whether the agency was trying to obstruct justice. Behind closed doors today, CIA Director General Michael Hayden will have to explain to the Senate Intelligence Committee why hundreds of hours of tapes were destroyed before he took office. The most infamous of the al-Qaeda leaders videotaped was Abu Zubaydah, subjected to waterboarding, simulated drowning, after his arrest in Pakistan in March 2002. The CIA now admits it destroyed those tapes in 2005. Officials tell NBC News partly out of concern that the interrogators could be prosecuted.

Now a former CIA officer, John Kiriakou, involved in capturing Abu Zubaydah, says he knew about the waterboarding, now views it as torture, but necessary to prevent more terror attacks. Other experts disagree.

Mr. ROGER CRESSEY (NBC News Terrorism Analyst): Waterboarding will guarantee a confession. That does not mean it guarantees the truth. So if you look at these techniques, you have to look at them with an eye towards what is the result.

MITCHELL: Accused of bombing the USS Cole in Yemen, a second al-Qaeda operative, Abdul al-Nashiri, was also arrested and interrogated on tape in 2002. Those tapes [were] also destroyed.

Former intelligence officials tell NBC News of the four congressional leaders briefed at the time about the waterboarding, only one, Democratic Congresswoman Jane Harman, objected. She also later warned the CIA in writing against destroying the tapes. But she had to take an oath never to reveal what she'd been told until the CIA did.

Representative JANE HARMAN (Former House Intelligence Committee Member): All I'm convinced about is that the CIA has made a big mistake and that there are a lot of facts Congress needs to learn.

MITCHELL: Condoleezza Rice, national security adviser when the waterboarding took place, now says she didn't know about the decision to destroy the tapes three years later.

Secretary of State CONDOLEEZZA RICE: I was secretary of state in 2005, indeed, and I can tell you that I myself don't recollect any knowledge of tapes.

MITCHELL: A high-ranking CIA official, former head of the clandestine service, Jose Rodriguez, ordered the tapes to be destroyed with written approval from agency lawyers even though they had been warned by the White House, by Congress and the Justice Department years earlier to preserve the tapes. Well, now the Justice Department has opened a preliminary investigation creating a major legal and credibility problem for the nation's intelligence services. Matt:

LAUER: All right, Andrea, thank you.

The former CIA agent you just saw in Andrea's piece, John Kiriakou, led the team that captured al-Qaeda leader Abu Zubaydah. Now he calls the waterboarding that was used on Zubaydah torture.

Mr. Kiriakou, good morning. Nice to see you.

Mr. JOHN KIRIAKOU (Former CIA Agent Who Defends Use of Torture): Thanks for having me.

LAUER: Let's compare and contrast. When Zubaydah was arrested in Pakistan and you were the first person to question him back in 2002, what was his level of cooperation? What information did he give you?

Mr. KIRIAKOU: He was in terrible physical condition when we first captured him. He had been shot in the operation to capture him and he was in a coma for much of the first several days. He finally came out of it and at first was just speaking nonsensically. He wanted a glass of red wine, for example. Then he asked me if I would smother him with a pillow. But once he really came out of it and began talking, he expressed regret for the attacks and things like that.

LAUER: Fast-forward and Zubaydah is sent to one of these secret locations somewhere. You will not disclose that, and I understand why. And he was questioned using these so-called enhanced interrogation techniques.

Mr. KIRIAKOU: Correct.

LAUER: Were you actively involved in the decision to use those techniques?

Mr. KIRIAKOU: I was not.

LAUER: Where was the permission given in your opinion? The highest levels of the CIA? Was the White House involved in that decision?

Mr. KIRIAKOU: Absolutely. This isn't something that's done willy-nilly. It's not something that an agency officer just wakes up in the morning and decides he's going to carry out an enhanced technique on a prisoner. This was a policy decision that was made at the White House with concurrence from the National Security Council and the Justice Department.

LAUER: Was it blanket permission for this particular prisoner? In other words, use it no matter what, or did there have to be permission before each interrogation?

Mr. KIRIAKOU: Before each interrogation, but more than that, before each technique was used. For example, if you want to waterboard someone, you have to come in with a cable, with a well-laid-out, well-thought-out reason for wanting to do something like this.

LAUER: All right, so waterboarding, the guy's laid on his back, a cloth over his face, water is poured on that cloth. It simulates the feeling of drowning? Fair description?

Mr. KIRIAKOU: It does.

LAUER: In your opinion, torture or not torture?

Mr. KIRIAKOU: I think, yes, torture. I'm not saying that it wasn't necessary at the time, and I'll let the lawyers decide if it's legal or not, but at the time I think it was necessary to disrupt terrorist attacks.

LAUER: But it was torture in your opinion?

Mr. KIRIAKOU: I believe it was.

LAUER: Let me play you something that President Bush said to me about a year and a half ago on this very subject in the Oval Office.

Mr. KIRIAKOU: Mm-hmm.

President GEORGE W. BUSH: (September 2006) Matt, I'm not going to talk about techniques, and I'm not going to explain to the enemy what we're doing. All I'm telling you is that you've asked me whether or not we're doing things to protect the American people and I want the American people to know we are doing so. I told our people, 'Get information without torture,' and was assured by our Justice Department that we were not torturing.

LAUER: You disagree?

Mr. KIRIAKOU: I disagree. I know that there was a high-level policy debate on whether or not this was torture and that the Department of Justice and the White House counsel and the National Security Council decided that it was not at the time.

LAUER: The criticism is this, John, that under no circumstances should we cross the line in this country and resort to torture. Yours is somewhat of a nuanced opinion on that.

Mr. KIRIAKOU: It is. And it's something that a lot of us at the agency struggled with as these decisions were being made and implemented. We wanted to do anything we could to disrupt future terror attacks, especially on American soil, but at the same time, you have to sleep with yourself at night.

LAUER: And yet I understand that today you would not agree—you would not agree that it's proper.

Mr. KIRIAKOU: Correct.

LAUER: However, so if we were to get another top-level al-Qaeda operative and learn that an attack might be imminent, you would say today we shouldn't use this?

Mr. KIRIAKOU: Well, we've had six years since September 11th to develop sources of information inside al-Qaeda. We've had six years to work our relationships with foreign governments and foreign intelligence services to help them work their sources in al-Qaeda.

LAUER: But if you've got that guy in front of you who has the valuable information on a potential threat coming, an attack coming, you can't be half pregnant.

Mr. KIRIAKOU: No, you can't be. But I think that enough time has passed and we've been able to make enough inroads into some of these groups that we don't need enhanced techniques to really get that nugget of information.

LAUER: Finally, do you see any reason—can you think of any reason why the CIA would have destroyed the tapes of those interrogations other than to destroy valuable and incriminating evidence in a possible torture investigation?

Mr. KIRIAKOU: I want to believe that somebody just wasn't thinking and they went ahead and did it without thought for...

LAUER: You've had 14 years in the CIA.

Mr. KIRIAKOU: I know. I know.

LAUER: That's somewhat naive.

Mr. KIRIAKOU: It is, it is. And I want to think the best, but I think it was just a terrible mistake, at the very least for the historical record.

LAUER: And it destroyed evidence.

Mr. KIRIAKOU: I think it did.

LAUER: John Kiriakou. Mr. Kiriakou, thanks for your time this morning.

Mr. KIRIAKOU: Thanks for having me.

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