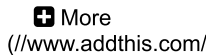




OPINION

‘Stealth privatization’ increases risk of torture

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By ROBERT WEINER AND BEN LASKY | Special to Stars and Stripes | Published: October 11, 2017

The idea of privatizing the war in Afghanistan with contractors was floated by notorious ex-Blackwater CEO Erik Prince, but the military immediately rejected the suggestion. However, as American Legion President Charles Schmidt said in August, “stealth privatization” has been and remains underway. President Donald Trump has been in a middle ground on this issue.

The president’s proposed federal budget would have led to the privatization of the Department of Veterans Affairs. The Choice Program was created during the VA scandal, allowing veterans who live 40 or more miles away from a health care facility or have to wait at least 30 days for an appointment, to seek private medical treatment. The recently passed Veterans Affairs Choice and Quality Employment Act extended the program until its funding runs out.

While the Choice Program could become permanent, unemployment benefits for disabled veterans would be slashed by \$40.8 billion over 10 years at the same time under the administration’s budget. That’s why Schmidt called the proposal “stealth privatization.”

Matthew Cary, founding president of Veterans and Military Families for Progress and board member of the Salute America's Heroes Coalition, is concerned about privatization. In an interview Oct. 4, he told us, "The move toward privatization is going against the current practice that works so well for the country. Why do we need to be tampering with that?"

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Cary says there are lots of reasons not to privatize fighting wars, most importantly that defending our country is a matter of "service, not profits." Another is to protect against torture.

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It was private CIA contractors who committed torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq that destroyed the U.S. reputation for morality in the Middle East and much of the international community. The administration should leave the war in Afghanistan in the hands of the military, who unlike contractors, adhere to the Army Field

Manual.

The Army Field Manual follows the Geneva Conventions and states, “All captured or detained personnel shall be treated humanely at all times and in accordance with DOD Directive 3115.09 ... and no person in the custody or under the control of the DOD, regardless of nationality or physical location, shall be subject to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment as defined in US law, including the Detainee Treatment Act of 2005.” Private contractors of the CIA are not under these restrictions.

Trump said during the 2016 campaign when discussing his views on torture, that, “I don’t think it’s tough enough,” and that he prefers “much worse.” This is a campaign pledge that a private military would implement.

While the military has refused to do CIA contractor-style torture, they have given it a wink and nod. When Gen. Geoffrey Miller moved from Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to Abu Ghraib, he reportedly vowed to “Gitmoize” Abu Ghraib by moving torture strategies over. Simply allowing the CIA to do it through private contractors is no better. In fact, it’s worse, because there is no oversight. According to Open Society Foundations, established by investor and philanthropist George Soros, the U.S. has been farming out torture to 54 countries since 9/11.

A 2008 bill would have stopped the CIA from bypassing the Army Field Manual, but after the bill passed both chambers of Congress, it was vetoed by President George W. Bush. So that legislation does not exist and CIA torture remains an option.

Torture brings contempt and revenge. According to a report by the Director of National Intelligence, through 2016, 29 percent of Gitmo detainees have “re-engaged in terrorism” — but only 7 percent of those released under former President Barack Obama did so after his “no torture” order was issued at the beginning of his administration.

While appearing on MSNBC in January, retired four-star Gen. Barry McCaffrey, called Trump’s words on torture “against international law. It puts our military at risk. This is a really shaky position.”

The U.S. often holds itself as an example for the rest of the world. We speak up when human rights abuses take place. It is time to get back to being an example on how we treat prisoners of war. The proposal to privatize war-making was rightly nipped in the bud. But there is not yet a nail in the coffin of privatization or private contractor torture.

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