

Dems push for torture hearings, ignoring Obama
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By LARRY MARGASAK
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) - Brushing aside the president's suggestions, congressional Democrats pushed ahead firmly on Wednesday toward investigations into the Bush administration's harsh interrogation of terror suspects including hundreds of instances of waterboarding and other abusive practices.

President Barack Obama said a day earlier that if there was to be an investigation, the independent commission that looked into the Sept. 11 attacks would be a better model than a congressional probe that might break down along party lines. But Democrats were moving in their own directions, and Republicans were united in their opposition to a commission that they see as an effort to vilify George W. Bush now that he is out of office.

Democrats moved toward separate hearings in the House and Senate and seemed to be jostling each other for leadership roles on the issue, all but ignoring Obama's effort to head off an uncontrolled, partisan sprint toward a rash of probes that could impair the foreign policy he now steers.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein of California pointedly noted that her Intelligence Committee already is investigating the Bush administration's legal underpinnings for the interrogation program and the value of information gained from it. And several Democratic leaders appeared to favor using that panel for any hearings.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada said the Intelligence Committee inquiry "will answer a lot of the questions the

American people have. ... One way or another there needs to be a public accounting of these troublesome policies."

There was no shortage of other ideas for how that might be achieved.

The chairmen of both the Senate and House Judiciary committees. Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont and Rep. John Conyers of Michigan, are proposing an independent "Truth Commission," and Conyers also is planning committee hearings of his own. His panel is populated with liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans, a prescription for a bitter fight.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said she supports a Truth Commission. Her spokesman, Brendan Daly, said she also supports Conyers' plan to hold separate hearings.

Republicans were decidedly unenthusiastic.

Sen. Kit Bond of Missouri, vice chairman of the Intelligence Committee, said he supports that panel's bipartisan review but opposes Leahy's idea of a Truth Commission.

Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, senior Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee, also dismissed the idea of a separate commission probe, saying, "All of the facts are readily available to the Department of Justice."

The investigation is up to the government's new Obama officials, he suggested. "Once the administration has a key to the front door, which they've had for several months, all they have to do is find the right filing cabinets and open them, which they're already doing," he said.

Meanwhile, the idea of strict partisanship was undercut by a memo from the Obama administration's top intelligence official.

National Intelligence Director Dennis Blair privately told employees last week that "high value information" was obtained in interrogations that included harsh techniques. "A deeper understanding of the al-Qaida network" resulted, Blair wrote in a memo later obtained by The Associated Press. He added, "I like to think I would not have approved those methods in the past."

Critics of the harsh methods—waterboarding, face slapping, sleep deprivation and other techniques—have called them torture. Obama said Tuesday they showed the United States "losing our moral bearings" and said they would not be used while he is in office. But he did not say whether he believed they worked.

En route to Iowa Wednesday for an Earth Day event with Obama, White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said next steps should be up to the Justice Department, not politicians.

"If somebody knowingly broke the law, that's a determination that will be ultimately made by a legal official, not by the president of the United States, or not by anybody else," he said.

Attorney General Eric Holder said that CIA officers who followed Justice Department policy in the Bush administration will not be prosecuted, but that the evidence will dictate what happens to the officials who authorized or approved the harsh interrogations.

"We'll follow the law wherever that takes us," Holder said. "No one is above the law. So we'll see what happens."

House Republican Leader John Boehner of Ohio said the Obama administration should concentrate on keeping the country safe. He said its release of Bush era memos on the terrorism techniques was

done "without talking about how the administration and previous administrations helped keep America safe and what our plan is to continue to keep America safe."

Leahy, who hasn't finalized the shape of his proposed commission, raised the possibility of granting witnesses immunity from prosecution. That, however, could conflict with any decision by the Justice Department to prosecute anyone who broke the law.

After Congress' investigation in the 1980s into illegal U.S. funding for Nicaraguan rebels, the conviction of national security aide Oliver North was vacated because witnesses might have been influenced by his immunized congressional testimony.

House and Senate leaders walked carefully through Congress' next step, just as Obama did.