

WHAT THE WHITE HOUSE “OFFICIAL ANNOUNCEMENT” OF UNDIEBOMB 2.0 WOULD HAVE LOOKED LIKE

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contest going on between the AP and John Brennan over the roll-out of the UndieBomb 2.0 “plot” earlier this month.

When the AP first broke the story on UndieBomb 2.0, it explained that it had held the story but decided to publish before the Administration made an official announcement on what would have been Tuesday, May 8.

The AP learned about the thwarted plot last week but agreed to White House and CIA requests not to publish it immediately because the sensitive intelligence operation was still under way.

Once those concerns were allayed, the AP decided to disclose the plot Monday despite requests from the Obama administration to wait for an official announcement Tuesday. [my emphasis]

Since that time, the Administration has tried to claim they never intended to make an official announcement about the “plot.” They did so for a May 9 LAT story.

U.S. intelligence officials had planned to keep the bomb sting secret, a senior official said, but the Associated Press learned of the operation last week. The AP delayed posting the story at the request of the Obama administration, but then broke the news Monday.

“When the AP got it and started talking about it, it caused all kinds of problems with the operation,” said a U.S. official who would not be quoted by name discussing the classified operation. “The investigation never went to its full conclusion.”

AP spokesman Paul Colford said the news agency held off publishing until U.S. officials told the AP that security concerns were allayed.

“We were told on Monday that the operation was complete and that the White House was planning to announce it Tuesday,” he said.

Then the White House tried misdirection for a Mark Hosenball story last week—both blaming AP for information about the Saudi infiltrator the AP didn’t break, and attributing Brennan’s comments implying the plot involved an infiltrator to hasty White House efforts to feed the news cycle spin respond to the story.

According to National Security Council spokesman Tommy Vietor, due to its sensitivity, the AP initially agreed to a White House request to delay publication of the story for several days.

But according to three government officials, a final deal on timing of publication fell apart over the AP’s insistence that no U.S. official would respond to the story for one clear hour after its release.

When the administration rejected that demand as “untenable,” two officials said, the AP said it was going public with the story. At that point, Brennan was immediately called out of a meeting to take charge of damage control.

[snip]

The AP denies any quid pro quo was requested by them or rejected by the White House. “At no point did AP offer or propose a deal with regard to this story,” said AP spokesman Paul Colford.

[snip]

The White House places the blame squarely on AP, calling the claim that Brennan contributed to a leak “ridiculous.”

“It is well known that we use a range of intelligence capabilities to penetrate and monitor terrorist groups,” according to an official statement from the White House national security staff.

“None of these sources or methods was disclosed by this statement. The egregious leak here was to the Associated Press. The White House fought to prevent this information from being reported and ultimately worked to delay its publication for operational security reasons. No one is more upset than us about this disclosure, and we support efforts to prevent leaks like this which harm our national security,” the statement said.

The original AP story, however, made no mention of an undercover informant or allied “control” over the operation, indicating only that the fate of the would-be suicide bomber was unknown. [my emphasis]

Now, there are several problems with this latest

White House story. The allegation of a quid pro quo rests on the premise that the Administration was also about to release the information; it's just a different version of the request to hold the story until an official White House announcement. Furthermore, if the White House didn't want this information out there, then why brief Richard Clarke and Fran Fragos Townsend, who went from there to prime time news shows and magnified the story?

In short, the White House attempt to blame the release of this story on the AP makes less and less sense every time they change their story.

But there's another piece of counter-evidence to claims the White House didn't intend to do a dog-and-pony show boasting of their success at "foiling" an AQAP bomb "plot."

The dog-and-pony show they rolled out the last time they foiled an AQAP bomb plot targeting the US, four days before the midterm elections in 2010.

In a nearly analogous situation with the toner cartridge plot—the US taking credit for foiling an AQAP plot largely thanks to a Saudi-run agent—the White House had a big announcement, including an appearance from the President.

I'm not certain, but news of the plot first came out of the UK, where officials intercepted one of the two bombs in East Midlands Airport (the Beeb did a timeline of the news as it rolled out; the times are 6 hours ahead of ET). Reports of two planes being searched—in Newark and Philadelphia—came out in late morning. Then Press Secretary Robert Gibbs issued official statements on the plot. In mid-afternoon, the White House announced Obama would make a statement at 4:15. Obama spoke, followed by Gibbs offering a chronology of the government response to the plot (which notably neglects to mention that Brennan first found out about the plot from Saudi intelligence head Mohammed bin Nayef). The White House even released a picture, above, purportedly of Brennan briefing Obama and

others in the situation room, though not matching any of the meetings Gibbs described at the presser. And then Brennan answered questions, as he has with other national security ops.

Not surprisingly, Brennan's briefing doesn't mention Jabir al-Fayfi, the former Gitmo detainee who had flipped and infiltrated AQAP under Saudi control, and had just returned to Saudi Arabia 13 days earlier and tipped the Saudis off to the plot. But the briefing also pointedly avoids mentioning the Saudis—or their role providing the tracking numbers for the packages—at all.

Q Mr. Brennan, if you could talk about what we know beyond the fact that this was from Yemen, there are people in Yemen with AQAP who want to harm us – if there is more that can be established to create a direct link beyond the country of origin?

MR. BRENNAN: I think, as Robert said, this is an active and ongoing investigation. We are working very closely with our partners in Yemen and United Arab Emirates, as well as in the United Kingdom and other countries, as well.

[snip]

Q I wonder, Mr. Brennan, if you can back that tick-tock up just a little bit. What did you know at the time when you briefed the President last night? And were these packages just discovered through random screenings? Or was there something that tipped you off to these packages?

MR. BRENNAN: Well, I knew enough last night to be able to brief the President, number one. Number two, I think the American people should feel particularly good that since 9/11, the U.S. government has built up a very, very

capable and robust intelligence, law enforcement, homeland security system. And as a result of the strength of that system, information became available that we were able to act upon very quickly and that we were able to locate these packages.

So I'm not going to go into the details about how we became aware of it. But the redundant layers of security, the tremendous work of the counterterrorism professionals, law enforcement, homeland security, intelligence, was the reason why we were able to succeed.

Q If I can just follow up on that – you're saying then that you were aware of this plot not because of the packages but because of something else?

MR. BRENNAN: I'm saying that whenever you pull a string, there's a reason why you start to pull that string. And we had a reason to pull it. And as a result of what we were able to uncover in East Midlands Airport, with the very strong cooperation of British authorities, we were able to also then take additional steps. And that's why those prudent measures were taken today to ensure that we were able to identify any other packages that might be out there of concern.

[snip]

Q Can I get someone to clarify – and it follows up on Ann's question – with the packages themselves, what made the packages suspicious, or something else led you to the package?

MR. BRENNAN: As I said, the American people should be very pleased that we were able to get insight into the fact that there were suspicious packages out there that we had to find. And I'm not going to go into those operational

details. I think that's the reason why we have a security system in place that has these redundancies and the ability to detect things, from inception all the way to the possible execution of an operation. So we were on to this, but I'm not going to get into details about how we knew. [my emphasis]

I guess Brennan has gotten worse at hiding the involvement of Saudi infiltrators in AQAP plots. Too much practice leaking secrets, I guess. Oddly, it appears the Saudis—and possibly Mohammed bin Nayef himself—revealed their role in the Saudi press within two days (as they had publicized the return of al-Fayfi).

Brennan also rolled off the same kind of generic statement he has made numerous times, including a number of times since UndieBomb 2.0 was revealed, vouching for the always better than ever before Yemeni counterterrorism cooperation.

Q And a quick big picture – the Yemeni cooperation – considering this is now multiple attempted terrorist attacks it looks like emanating from Yemen, is it fair to say that we don't have the best cooperation yet with the Yemeni government?

MR. BRENNAN: I would say that over the past 22 months or so, during this administration, and even in the prior administration, there has been a steady improvement in that cooperation. I would say that the CT cooperation right now with Yemen is better than it's been ever before. That doesn't mean that it can't improve more. It needs to improve more. I've been out to Yemen four times during the past two years. We're working very closely with them. And we found that they are courageous partners. Many Yemenis have lost their lives in the battle against al Qaeda.

[snip]

We are working very closely with the Yemeni government, and we've been able to make some significant progress against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula inside of Yemen, working with those partners.

We'll continue to do this. If anything, this just demonstrates to us, and I think to the Yemenis as well, that we need to redouble our efforts so that we're able to destroy al Qaeda. And we will. [my emphasis]

Overall, Brennan created the illusion that we discovered this plot through American intelligence and quick response, not a phone call from Mohammed bin Nayef reporting on the intelligence he got from the former Gitmo detainee he had flipped.

Now, I explored all this to show how utterly absurd White House pique at AP is, on its face. Given the opportunity, it seems clear, they would have rolled out a similar dog-and-pony, hiding the Saudi role in this plot, particularly that of the Saudi infiltrator, while celebrating the intelligence success of the US.

So why is John Brennan so cranky at the AP?