

THE TORTURED INTRA-ADMINISTRATION SQUABBLE CONTINUES

The NYT has another story mapping the tensions within the White House over the torture issue (though this one, which cites Rahm directly, primarily portrays him—implausibly—as the neutral broker), this one focusing on the Holder-Panetta drama. The most interesting passage in the story, though, is this one.

At the time, Mr. Panetta felt besieged on several fronts. Mr. Blair, the intelligence director, was pushing to appoint the senior intelligence officials in each country overseas, a traditional prerogative of the C.I.A.

And other administration officials complained when the C.I.A. sent documents about the detention program to the Senate Intelligence Committee without giving the White House time to consider whether there were any executive privilege issues.

The interagency debate grew heated enough that Mr. Emanuel summoned Mr. Panetta, Mr. Blair and other officials to the White House to set down rules for what should be provided to Congress. Mr. Panetta complained that he was being chastised for excessive openness after being criticized for excessive secrecy when he pushed to withhold details from the interrogation memos.

The various issues raised by the Bush-era interrogation and detention policies have caused other tensions within the Obama team. Mr. Emanuel and others have concluded that the White House mishandled the planning for the closing of the detention center at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

Set aside the Blair-Panetta tension over Chiefs of Station here for the moment, which structurally in this passage is just a feint. While I'm sure the Blair-Panetta squabble over Chiefs of Station came up at the meeting, the passage focuses more closely on what CIA gave to SSCI—presumably for its extensive investigation into the torture program. This dispute was reported—as an intra-CIA squabble—back in May. And back then, Mark Hosenball reported that Panetta wanted to give full cables to SSCI, but instead compromised on giving them redacted cables.

Panetta's instinct was to give Congress what it wanted. But undercover officers warned him that this would break with standard practice, and veteran spies worried that it would chill brainstorming between field agents and their controllers. Aiming to compromise, Panetta signaled to Congress that the CIA would turn over only redacted documents—and that it would take a long time to vet as many as 10 million pages of cable traffic.

Congressional investigators aren't backing down, however, insisting on all of the material without deletions, including names of personnel who participated in harsh questioning, and holding subpoenas in reserve.

Okay, so what I'm interested in is that a fight that, in May, was portrayed (by a very good journalist) as a fight within the CIA, and between CIA and Congress, is now being portrayed as a fight within the Obama Administration. And while the "other officials" named twice in this passage could well be more junior people at CIA, it seems much more likely that it is Greg Craig and John Brennan (the former because this piece is a thinly disguised Rahm rehash of his issues with Craig, and the latter because he's the other known big player in the torture debate). Those are just wildarsed guesses, mind you, and

the passage is interesting regardless of who those other officials are. But that's my guess.

I'm interested in this both because it reveals that there's disagreement within the White House over how open to be with Congress. And because it puts this dispute—which previously had been a CIA affair—centrally in the ongoing squabbles over torture in the White House.