

SO WHY CAN'T DEMOCRATS REIN IN THE INTELLIGENCE INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX?

Jeff Stein had a piece on the response to the WaPo article on intelligence contracting the other day that started with this question:

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has long wanted more members of Congress to know what's going on at the CIA, but why doesn't she announce a full-fledged investigation into the intelligence contractor mess, complete with televised hearings?

In it, he quotes from someone he describes as a Pelosi aide saying there's little will to get this done.

Back to Pelosi: An aide, who like all the others speaks only on condition of anonymity, said she "certainly sees a need to step up oversight." But after taking an informal sounding, he added, Pelosi found "there wasn't any momentum for it."

I asked her about that quote when we talked on Saturday. Her first response was to deny that such a quote could have come from one of her staffers, and to suggest it had come from the intelligence committee (which is what her office said in a follow-up to me as well).

Pelosi: You mean someone from the intelligence committee? Not my staff or my office.

When I asked whether there was any support for doing something about contracting, Pelosi said the WaPo article had raised awareness of the

problem.

Wheeler: Is there the support in the House and the Senate to do something about all this contracting?

Pelosi: This has been very well read by members.

Wheeler: The Washington Post piece?

Pelosi: Yes. And it isn't, it doesn't come as a surprise to people. But it comes as almost a relief that finally some of this is out in the open.

Pelosi went on to describe all the problems with contracting: the cost, the lack of a single chain of accountability, the lack of information-sharing, and the turf battles. Then she basically said the Intelligence Committee would have to take a look—or, maybe, the Administration might assess whether it was making us safer.

Pelosi: I think there, my view is, I think the intelligence committees would have to take a really harsh look, and I would hope the Administration has to say, are the American people safer because of what's happening in the intelligence community and I think it's all about their security.

In response to her hope the Administration would do something about contracting, I noted that James Clapper—on his way to being confirmed as DNI—has been a big fan of contracting. Pelosi's response was to direct responsibility back to the Intelligence Committee.

Wheeler: Although, again, Clapper has been involved in the contracting side and seems to be a pretty big fan of using contractors, I mean he kind of poo-pooed the whole article, so do you think Clapper, again, assuming he's approved...

Pelosi: I don't have to vote on him so I'm sort of, I'm always saying to the White House, why him? No, I just don't know. I don't want to go there. I don't know enough to give you a precise view on that. But I do know that this really needs some careful consideration and some review and the intelligence committee is the appropriate place to do it.

Of course, the folks at the Intelligence Committee—at least according to Pelosi though not according to the attribution in his article—are the ones giving Jeff Stein anonymous quotes saying any real investigation of the contracting won't happen.

For her part, Jan Schakowsky (remember, she was in the room for the interview) doubted the commitment (implicitly, I assume she means the Executive Branch, since they're the ones still awarding Blackwater contracts) to reducing intelligence contracting. But she also doubts whether the committees (remember, she's a member of HPSCI) know what these contractors are doing, and ultimately comes back to the question of whether they make us safer.

Schakowsky: While there has occasionally been lip service that we need to reduce the number of contractors, it's been disappointing to me that in the last few months we've seen Blackwater get another big contract with the CIA and with the State Department. I would really question the commitment—any commitment—to reducing the number of contractors. Just even in the most sensitive missions.

So I have—you know about my legislation. Stop outsourcing our national security. This is for the 27,000 private contractors, the gun carrying, that are doing these very sensitive missions and have a history of jeopardizing the

mission, the safety of our troops, we've never done a good cost analysis. The Post story talks about how more expensive it is to use these people, and I am absolutely unconvinced that the committees know what some of these contractors are doing. So I want to see us have people that wear the badge of the United States of America, who are accountable to the combatant commander, there's a clear chain of command, there's laws that clearly govern what they do. You know right now there's a grey area governing contractors, you know, and you ask yourself, what do they have to do, kill someone, before they become ineligible? Oh yeah, they've done that. Oh yeah, they've done that.

Pelosi: Oh yeah, they've done that. And that—what—Jamie Leigh Jones stuff, too. The sexual harassment and all that. They've done that. And hopefully we can renew that in the appropriations bill that they can't pay...

Schakowsky: I think that there's enormous risk involved. You know, the Speaker asked the right question. Are we safer, how risky is it, to have all of these, over a quarter of a million people, who have these Top Secret, these private contractors who have these Top Secret clearance, marching around with very little accountability, transparency, or oversight.

I think Schakowsky and Pelosi lay out the problems of the issue well, but it sure seems there's a lack of leadership on this issue (the Chair of HPSCI, Silvestre Reyes' office, apparently didn't respond to Stein's inquiry, for example).

But there may be another problem. In a comment addressing a different issue (passing legislation to close Gitmo, though he said it

applied to legislation to protect civil liberties and rein in executive power, as well), on our panel the other day (1:11:01), Jerry Nadler spoke of Democrats' "unwillingness or inability to bring good things to the floor."

It's safe to say—and I won't attribute it to anyone except it's an observation I'll make—it's very difficult to get anything on the floor of the House that will cause a vote that some people are worried would be interpreted by 30 second TV ads as "Congressman so-and-so voted in favor of the terrorists" or "Congressman so-and-so voted to make us less safe from the terrorists."

That is, for things having to do with counter-terrorism, there's an unwillingness to take a stand for fear it will hurt the position of what Nadler calls the Democrats' "marginal" members.

Our utter dependence on intelligence contractors—like our failure to close Gitmo—is making us less safe. Are we refusing to do something about contracting for the same reason—that we're too afraid of being accused of making America less safe to actually do obvious, necessary things to make ourselves more safe?