

ONE GOOD REASON THE WAPO SHOULD NOT GET KUDOS FOR ITS “TOP SECRET” SERIES

The WaPo has an article out that’s causing quite a stir. It bemoans the fact that the CIA has lost much of its top managers since 9/11.

More than 90 of the agency’s upper-level managers have left for the private sector in the past 10 years, according to data compiled by The Washington Post. In addition to three directors, the CIA has lost four of its deputy directors for operations, three directors of its counterterrorism center and all five of the division chiefs who were in place the day of the Sept. 11 attacks and responsible for monitoring terrorism and instability across the world.

Let’s name some of the people they’re talking about, shall we?

- George “Slam Dunk” Tenet
- Porter Goss
- Michael Hayden
- John McLaughlin
- Stephen Kappes
- Jose Rodriguez
- Cofer Black
- Robert Grenier

Several of these people were instrumental in trumping up propaganda to justify a war of choice. Several others implemented a system of rendition and torture. One of them helped the Vice President set up an illegal domestic wiretap program. The least compromised, legally (Grenier), probably was less than forthcoming under oath in the CIA Leak Case.

Really?!?! We're bemoaning the fact that this parade of criminally and morally compromised people are no longer in a position of top leadership (though a number of them are still on the federal gravy train as contractors)?

There's also little consideration of why and where Black went when they left: the urge to have mercenaries as a way to evade legal limits drove some of this exodus as much as money.

Two (digital) pages later, the WaPo finally gets around to the real problem with the exodus of more junior level officers: the loss of functional expertise.

In 2009, after a double-agent blew himself up at a CIA base in Afghanistan, killing seven of the agency's officers, many former officials suggested that the tragedy might have been prevented had the CIA retained more senior personnel at the outpost.

Some officials questioned why the agency had given one of the top assignments there to an officer who had never served in a war zone. Other former officials raised concerns about how intelligence assets were being handled in the field.

"The tradecraft that was developed over many years is passe," a recently retired senior intelligence official said at the time. "Now it's a military tempo, where you don't have time for validating and vetting sources. . . . All that seems to have gone by the board. It shows there are not a lot of people with a great deal of experience in this field."

In other words, the problem with contracting is far more complex than the WaPo, in a fairly long article, was able to explain. And in the process, the WaPo never explained a lot of the nuances behind what it sold as its top line story: the departure of the top managers.

I'm not saying the WaPo hasn't done a lot of work on this story overall. But telling a story—particularly one as complex and important as this one—is more than collecting data points.