

FOR LACK OF THE MOST APPROPRIATE WORD: “LIE”

I really wanted to just ignore this Michael Cohen column, which purports to explain to “the Left” (which by and large approves of Obama’s drone war) why they should welcome John Brennan to head the CIA because he will reform the drone war there.

But when I read this paragraph—the 10th of 11 paragraphs in the column, I couldn’t resist.

In addition, Brennan’s public statements on the drone program and U.S. policy toward Yemen have, for lack of a better term, not always passed the smell test. His assertion last year that he could not confirm the death of a single civilian from U.S. drones hardly seems credible. Moreover, if Brennan was so serious about reforming drone use, why hasn’t he done it already?

Cohen picks up a criticism I made with him on Twitter the other day, which Glenn Greenwald, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, and I have written about: John Brennan has said things about the drone program that have, “for lack of a better term, not always passed the smell test.” (Note, Cohen doesn’t acknowledge that Brennan’s public speech on drones was also obviously misleading, not least because it disclaimed the existence of signature strikes.)

Of course, there is a better term for the assertion—made by the man who (Cohen has spent much of the previous 10 paragraphs telling us) is privy to all the information exchanged in the drone program—that there had been no civilian casualties in the drone war.

A lie.

So in paragraph 10 of an 11 paragraph column,

Cohen sort of admits, even if he cowers from the best term for it, that Brennan has lied about the very subject of this column.

Which is all the funnier, because two of the assertions Cohen makes on in paragraphs 1 through 9 rely on claims Brennan made.

Brennan [] goes to President Obama for his approval [as I have noted, there's a long history of Presidential gatekeepers who do not in fact inform the President of things so he can retain plausible deniability about them]

[snip]

Brennan stated this past fall, "I think the rule should be that if we're going to take actions overseas that result in the deaths of people, the United States should take responsibility for that."

And while there is evidence that Brennan has reeled in the CIA Counterterrorism Center head's out-of-control signature strike campaign in Pakistan (at least until the last couple of weeks), he also approved the same kind of signature strikes in Yemen.

This is one of the problems with Brennan's boosters. They invest everything in chosen Brennan statements, while ignoring that he has shamelessly lied in statements about the very same topic.

Sure, Brennan might be telling the truth in some of these public statements, even in spite of the fact that his past statements were such obvious lies. Brennan might want to reform the drone program (even though he stalled the effort to do so that was part of preparation for a Mitt Romney administration and ignored his own reformed rules). But no one should build an argument off them, because given Brennan's history of lying, they cannot be considered credible. That's the problem with lying as embarrassingly as Brennan has done, because such

lies should—in a rational world—undermine the credibility of all your statements. Cohen builds his argument, in paragraphs 1 through 9, on statements that he admits should not be trusted in paragraph 10.

Side note: It's troubling how, just 10 years after Bush lied us into the Iraq War with help from Brennan's boss, George Tenet, Brennan's boosters seem unconcerned about putting a proven liar in charge of the CIA.

Now there are things I agree with in Cohen's column. As I've said repeatedly, putting Brennan in a position where Congress will have oversight over Brennan may be an improvement over Brennan in a position where Congress has none (though as I've noted, in the last two years the Obama Administration has made sure that Brennan's work will remain more hidden than that of his predecessors).

And I think the best thing that might—though is by no means guaranteed, given Brennan's fondness for data mining and his primary background in analysis—come out of a Brennan CIA is not so much a disavowal of CIA's paramilitary focus (paramilitary actions are built into the multidisciplinary focus that Brennan's actions have favored), but at least a focus on improving HUMINT to somewhat credible levels. Brennan's Arabic would certainly help him on this front; his close ties to the Saudis, who like having us dependent on them for HUMINT, might hurt him.

All that said, there's one more thing I don't understand in the claim that Brennan will improve the drone program. As CIA Director, he will have the ability—akin to how Robert Gates ceded certain functions to Hillary's State Department—to willingly cede turf to DOD. He will have the ability to choose not to fight for any more drones aside from the ones recently approved by ... John Brennan.

But how is that a more powerful position from which to reform the drone program (particularly given that, after you've ceded it to DOD, you

lose all authority over it), than sitting in the White House and—as Brennan did last year when he pulled all targeting authority into the White House—having final say over the program?

Cohen as much as admits this problem with his logic when he asks, “if Brennan was so serious about reforming drone use, why hasn’t he done it already?”

Frankly, while I think Brennan’s confirmation offers a wonderful opportunity to demand more transparency on drones (that the Senate Intelligence Committee won’t take), that’s far from my central concern as Brennan takes over Langley.

I keep coming back to how enthusiastic people are about someone who has told such obvious lies taking over the Agency that is supposed to offer unvarnished intelligence. I keep coming back to the times Brennan has seeded propaganda about the most important intelligence missions. Most Iraq War critics thought it was horrible to have someone as willing to politicize intelligence as George Tenet at CIA. That, to me, is a more important question about John Brennan than whether DOD or CIA will continue to operate a poorly thought out drone war.