

THE REPEATED CONCERN ABOUT BRENNAN: HIS TIES TO SAUDIS

In a piece questioning President Obama's second term cabinet, David Ignatius describes John Brennan (who will be voted out of the Senate Intelligence Committee on Thursday) this way:

Obama's choice for CIA director is also telling. The White House warily managed Petraeus, letting him run the CIA but keeping him away from the media. In choosing Brennan, the president opted for a member of his inner circle with whom he did some of the hardest work of his presidency. Brennan was not a popular choice at the CIA, where some view him as having been too supportive of the Saudi government when he was station chief in Riyadh in the 1990s; these critics argue that Brennan didn't push the Saudis hard enough for intelligence about the rising threat of Osama bin Laden. But agency officials know, too, that the CIA prospers when its director is close to the president, which will certainly be the case with Brennan and Obama.

To some degree, the report that people within the CIA question Brennan's actions from when he was Riyadh station chief just reports what we already know. Michael Scheuer has been airing those complaints along the way. And Saxby Chambliss asked Brennan about Scheuer's allegations with his very first question at Brennan's confirmation hearing.

CHAMBLISS: Mr. Brennan, the 9/11 commission report describes a canceled 1998 CIA operation to capture Osama bin

Laden using tribal groups in Afghanistan. The former head of CIA's bin Laden unit told staff that you convinced Director Tenet to cancel that operation. He says that following a meeting you had in Riyadh with Director Tenet, the bin Laden unit chief and others that you cabled National Security Adviser Sandy Berger, saying the operation should be canceled in favor of a different approach, described by the 9/11 Commission as a, quote, "an all-out secret effort to persuade the Taliban to expel bin Laden." Now, as we know, bin Laden was not expelled. Three months later the bin Laden wrath was unleashed with the attack on our embassies. Did you advise senator – Director Tenet and National Security Adviser Berger against this operation? And if so, why?

BRENNAN: I had conversation with George Tenet at the time. But I must point out – out, Senator, that every single CIA manager – George Tenet, his deputy, the head of the director of operations at the time, and other individuals, the chief of the counterterrorism center – argued against that operation, as well, because it was no well-rounded in intelligence, and its chance of success were minimal – minimal. And it was likely that other individuals were going to be killed. And so when I was involved in those discussions, I provided the director and others my professional advice about whether or not I thought that that operation should go forward. I also was engaged in discussions with Saudi – the Saudi government at the time and encouraged certain actions to be taken so that we could put pressure on the Taliban as well as on bin Laden.

CHAMBLISS: So I'm taking it that your answer to my question is you did advise against – in favor of the cancellation

of that operation?

BRENNAN: Based on what I had known at the time, I didn't think that it was a worthwhile operation and it didn't have a chance of success.

While it has largely been ignored in the press, there have been hints throughout Brennan's confirmation process that some within the CIA blame Brennan for not pursuing al Qaeda more aggressively before 9/11.

But look at the formulation: this is a concern about what Brennan did 15 years ago, not what he did last year, when he decided to pursue signature strikes he had previously opposed in Yemen based on entreaties from someone in the Arabian peninsula.

Have folks at the CIA had their concerns about Brennan's stovepipes with the Saudis assuaged, based in part on what they've seen with his actions in Yemen? Or does the mention of pre-9/11 concerns serve as stand-in for a bunch of covert dealings no one can discuss?