

AP PRESIDENT FOCUSES ON WHITE HOUSE CLAIMS ABOUT OBL ANNIVERSARY THREATS

A lot of people are pointing to this Bob Schieffer interview of AP President Gary Pruitt because, later in the interview, Pruitt claims seizing the AP's records without narrowing the scope or notifying the AP is "unconstitutional." While that might make an interesting – though probably unsuccessful – argument if the AP takes this to court (note, Schieffer also asked whether the White House was trying to intimidate the AP, which seems the only basis for making a claim about constitutionality), I actually wanted to point to how Pruitt described the leak.

He emphasizes something that I pointed to here: the AP believed (or now says it believed) this was newsworthy because the White House had repeatedly said the government knew of no credible threat tied to the anniversary.

Pruitt: It was a very big story. And while the Justice Department hasn't told us this is the case, we know there's an announced public investigation to leaks in this case the focus was on this story. It was a story that only AP had. AP obtained knowledge that the US had thwarted an al Qaeda plot to place a bomb on an airliner bound for the United States. And it was round about the one, the year anniversary of the killing of Osama bin Laden.

Schieffer: So this was good news?

Pruitt: This was very good news. But strangely, at the same time, the Administration, through the Press Secretary and the Department of Homeland

Security were telling the American public that there was no credible evidence of a terrorist plot related to the anniversary of the killing of Osama bin Laden. So that was misleading to the American public. We felt the American public needed to know this story.

Schieffer: You got this story, at first the people that gave it to you asked you to hold it for a certain time.

Pruitt: Yeah, so what happened was we got this story, we went to the government – the White House, intelligence agencies. They said, “there’s a national security risk if you run this, if you go with this story at this time.” We respected that. We acted responsibly. Withheld the story. We held it for five days. On the fifth day, we heard from high officials in two parts of the government that the national security issues had passed. And at that point we released the story.

Schieffer: Am I correct in saying that when you decided finally to release it then you got word that the White House did not want it released because they wanted to announce it themselves?

Pruitt: The White House wanted to, wanted us to hold it another day because they wanted to announce this successful foiling of the plot.

Schieffer: So they didn’t want to get scooped?

Pruitt: I guess! They didn’t tell us their motive, but that certainly seemed that way to us. We didn’t think that was a legitimate reason for holding the story. The national security issues had passed, we released this story.

Schieffer: And if memory serves the top counterterrorism official at the White

House went on television the next morning and told the story.

Pruitt: Yes. The Administration was very aggressive in telling the story. [my emphasis]

What Pruitt is referring to, in part, is that Jay Carney introduced his April 26, 2012 press briefing by offering up the information that there were not threats tied to the OBL anniversary.

On a second matter, I just wanted to let you know that as part of his regular briefings on homeland security and counterterrorism, the President met today with members of his national security team to review the threat picture as we head into the anniversary of the bin Laden takedown.

At this time, we have no credible information that terrorist organizations, including al Qaeda, are plotting attacks in the U.S. to coincide with the anniversary of bin Laden's death. However, we asses that AQ's affiliates and allies remain intent on conducting attacks in the homeland, possibly to avenge the death of bin Laden, but not necessarily tied to the anniversary.

The President thanked his team and directed them to continue taking all necessary measures to protect the American people. [my emphasis]

Note the timing: this announcement came 2 days after Robert Mueller had an unscheduled 45-minute meeting in Yemen, where I suspect he picked up the UndieBomb that had been turned over several days earlier. So when Carney said this, UndieBomb 2.0 (to the extent it was a real plot in the first place) had already been rolled up.

And conflicting claims about threats must be what the AP told the White House was newsworthy, because – even though it played a fairly minor part of the original AP story – it is what John Brennan emphasized when explaining why he had to have a conference call that would lead to Richard Clarke figuring out the plot was actually a sting.

I said there was never a threat to the American public as we had said so publicly, because we had inside control of the plot and the device was never a threat to the American public.

[snip]

I – I – what I'm saying is that we were explaining to the American public why that IED was not in fact a threat at the time that it was in the control of individuals. When – when we say positive control, inside control, that means that we (inaudible) that operation either environmentally or any number of ways. It did not in any way reveal any type of classified information. And I told those individuals and there are, you know, transcripts that are available of that conversation, "I cannot talk to you about the operational details of this whatsoever."

I'm still not entirely why this was so sensitive to the White House. As I've noted, there were several possible ways for Brennan to explain the discrepancy away that wouldn't have outed their insider.

I think there are several possibilities, which I'll lay out in a follow-up post. But one detail seems clear: the question of whether and why the Administration was sending mixed signals about the anniversary threat is the bone of contention here.