

THE NEVERENDING CIA DRONE STORY ACTUALLY ABOUT OUTSOURCED INTELLIGENCE

On March 20, 2013, I wrote one of several stories calling bullshit on reports that CIA would get out of the drone business. Not only did John Brennan's actions up to that point (as opposed to what had been leaked to journalists anonymously) make it clear he intended for CIA to keep that portfolio. But his confirmation testimony made it clear he intended to retain and use CIA's paramilitary – as distinct from traditional military – capabilities (and no, I'm not sure where the line between the two lies).

Today, the NYT has another of those stories reporting that – shock!! – I was right after all. It has a new twist though. It selectively quotes from Brennan's confirmation materials to suggest he testified he would get CIA out of paramilitary operations.

During his confirmation hearings, Mr. Brennan obliquely criticized the performance of American spy agencies in providing intelligence and analysis of the Arab revolutions that began in 2009, and said the C.I.A. needed to cede some of its paramilitary role to the Pentagon.

“The C.I.A. should not be doing traditional military activities and operations,” he said.

This is what the quote actually looked like in context.

MIKULSKI: So, let me get to my questions. I have been concerned for

some time that there is a changing nature of the CIA, and that instead of it being America's top spy agency, top human spy agency to make sure that we have no strategic surprises, that it has become more and more executing paramilitary operations.

And I discussed this with you in our conversation. How do you see this? I see this as mission-creep. I see this as overriding the original mission of the CIA, for which you're so well versed, and more a function of the Special Operations Command. Could you share with me how you see the CIA and what you think about this militarization of the CIA that's going on?

BRENNAN: Senator, the principal mission of the agency is to collect intelligence, uncover those secrets, as you say, to prevent those strategic surprises and to be the best analytic component within the U.S. government, to do the allsource analysis that CIA has done so well for many, many years. At times, the president asks and directs the CIA to do covert action. That covert action can take any number of forms, to include paramilitary.

[snip]

And the CIA should not be doing traditional military activities and operations. [my emphasis]

That is, Brennan was not suggesting CIA should get out of paramilitary ops. On the contrary, he said CIA should retain that ability but not do traditional military activities.

His responses to questions for the record were even more clear.

What role do you see for the CIA in paramilitary-style intelligence

activities or covert action?

The CIA, a successor to the Office of Strategic Services, has a long history of carrying out paramilitary-style intelligence activities and must continue to be able to provide the President with this option should he want to employ it to accomplish critical national security objectives.

How do you distinguish between the appropriate roles of the CIA and elements of the Department of Defense in paramilitary-style covert action?

As stated in my response to Question 6 above, the CIA and DOD must be ready to carry out missions at the direction of the President. The President must be able to select which element is best suited. Factors that should be considered include the capabilities sought, the experience and skills needed, the material required, and whether the activity must be conducted covertly.

The NYT quotes one more Brennan claim with much more fidelity, however, and in a way that is far more illuminating to the story it tells.

"Despite rampant rumors that the C.I.A. is getting out of the counterterrorism business, nothing could be further from the truth," the C.I.A. director said during a speech last month at the Council on Foreign Relations.

The agency's covert action authorities and relationships with foreign spy services, Mr. Brennan said, "will keep the C.I.A. on the front lines of our counterterrorism efforts for many years to come."

Those lines come from this speech, which was

most closely watched as Brennan's rebuttal to Dianne Feinstein on the torture report, but which in fact declared the war on terror would continue along the same lines as it had since 9/11.

And despite rampant rumors that the CIA is getting out of the counterterrorism business, nothing could be further from the truth. CIA's global mission, our intelligence collection, analysis, and covert action authorities and capabilities, as well as our extensive liaison relationships with intelligence and security services worldwide, will keep CIA on the frontlines of our counterterrorism efforts for many years to come.

Which is interesting, because the items reported in NYT's story all say more about the US remaining hostage to the way we outsourced certain intelligence activities after 9/11 than anything else.

As a reminder, the Gloves Come Off Memorandum crafted by Cofer Black and signed on September 17, 2001 included a number of different activities. In addition to capturing and detaining top al Qaeda leaders (which became the torture program) and killing top al Qaeda figures using Predator drones (which remains in CIA hands), it authorized heavily subsidizing ("buying" was the word Bob Woodward used) Arab liaison services, originally including Jordan and Egypt but presumably adding Saudi Arabia once we got over the fact that the Saudis had ties to the attack. In a 2006 interview, John Brennan echoed and endorsed Cofer Black's plan when discussing the war on terror.

With that in mind, consider the real scope of the details described in the NYT story:

▪ After another
catastrophically badly

targeted strike – this time on a wedding – Yemen has banned JSOC's drones but continues to permit CIA to fly them; CIA's flights operate out of Saudi territory, presumably with significant Saudi involvement

- Pakistan continues to permit only drone strikes run by CIA
- Jordan required that CIA be in charge of training Syrian rebels and other fighters there
- CIA missed the Arab Spring because it relied so heavily on Egypt's Omar Suleiman, to whom we had outsourced our earliest torture

That is, the NYT is really reporting that, in spite of nominal efforts to change things, we remain captive to those relationships with liaison services, almost 13 years after 9/11. And that happens to also translate into operating drone strikes in such a way that two countries which were implicated in the 9/11 attacks – Pakistan and especially Saudi Arabia – have managed to stay relevant and above criticism by sustaining (perhaps artificially) our dependence on them.

And, almost certainly, the President's implicit role in all these actions gives the CIA the institutional clout to make sure it retains whatever parts of this portfolio it cares to.

This, at least, should be the story.

In all of these countries, it's not clear

whether our reliance on these long-term partners helps or exacerbates the war on terror. But no one should maintain any illusions that it will change.