

For US Congress, Running a Torture Prison Is a Good Career Move

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Gina Haspel has now been confirmed as the new Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) by a Senate vote of 54 to 45. She had previously been approved by the Senate Intelligence Committee by 10 votes to 5, with six Democrats joining all but three of the committee's Republicans. Haspel seems fully qualified in terms of her experience to do the job, though it is admittedly difficult to make that judgement because her full professional biography has not been revealed by CIA. Claims by supporters seeking to enhance her record that she was "under cover" for 32 years are meaningless as many officers who serve at Agency Headquarters in Langley have that status.

Accurate information on Haspel is hard to come by. Access to a top secret memo reportedly prepared by Committee Democrats concerning her possibly illegal activities [has been restricted](#) even among Senators. Nevertheless, as the first woman to become head of the Agency one might reasonably say that Haspel has certainly broken through several glass ceilings to obtain her new position.

During the Senate Intelligence Committee hearings Haspel vowed that, if approved, she would never again permit torture to be employed by the Agency. It was, of course, a necessary though empty gesture in that it appears quite clear that she did not demur at torture being used in the past. Intelligence whistleblower Edward Snowden expressed his opinion with a tweet when news of the confirmation became public, writing that

"Gina Haspel participated in a torture program that involved beating an innocent pregnant woman's stomach, anally raping a man with meals he tried to refuse, and freezing a shackled prisoner until he died. She personally wrote the order to destroy 92 tapes of CIA torture."

Haspel did indeed do all that and possibly more, but my objection to her is somewhat different. To be sure, torture should never have been employed by any federal government agency, but the confirmation of Haspel sends the clear message that there is no accountability for anyone who is at or near the top of the bureaucracy. Haspel's willing participation in running a black site prison where torture was carried out was illegal then just as it is illegal now, no matter what some slimy government lawyer whose job depended on pleasing his boss the president might have said. Gina Haspel could have turned the assignment down if she was bothered by what was going, but ambition drove her to accept the position and all it entails, making her current disavowing of torture a bit hard to accept.

The approval of Haspel by the Senate suggests that there is no crime that a government official cannot get away with if it is justified under the aegis of the "war on terror." On that

basis alone, Haspel should have been rejected, but instead she has been rewarded by a government that generally prefers to look the other way. Gina's success at avoiding any consequences for her action is reminiscent of the slap on the wrist received by former CIA Director David Petraeus, who revealed highly classified information to his lover/biographer Paula Broadwell.

All of which is not to suggest that government officials never get punished. Lower level officials are fair game when the criminal justice system is seeking to demonstrate that no one is above the law. Former CIA officer John Kiriakou was sentenced to prison after he revealed that torture in secret Agency prisons was taking place. Another CIA officer Jeffrey Sterling was imprisoned for allegedly revealing classified information to journalist James Risen. The government could not even prove that he had done so, but he was convicted anyway because "it had to be him."

If it now a matter of public record that running a torture prison is a good career move, supported by both parties in Congress. And it is also interesting to note how fiercely the CIA fought to keep from having to reveal details of Haspel's career or even the records of the torture prison. It is unlikely that reports relating to events that took place sixteen years ago could continue to be classified because they would reveal "intelligence sources and methods." Rather, they remain top secret because they are potentially embarrassing to the participants, to those who directed and approved the activity and to the organizations involved. In that light, the Haspel confirmation's acceptance of zero accountability is a perfect example of precisely what is wrong with the United States government.

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