

Joe Biden's Love Affair with the CIA

Biden's assistance to William Casey, Reagan's CIA director, and the rehabilitation of the intelligence service in general has had tragic consequences.

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When it comes to villainous bureaucrats, it's hard to assign a ranking for the most sinister aura, cumulative harm wrought on humanity, and general unpleasantness wrapped up in one. But Ronald Reagan's CIA chief William Casey is definitely near the head of the pack.

Prior to overseeing the CIA, Casey worked in military intelligence during World War II and thereafter offered up to postwar business elites that most unholy of statutory concoctions: the tax shelter (he wrote [the book](#) on the subject). He went on to serve on Ronald Reagan's transition team, during which time he was said to fly to Rome where, [departing from a black windowless C-141 jet](#), he visited the Vatican to brief Pope John Paul II on the latest developments in the war on communism. At the end of his life, Casey was directly implicated in the Iran-Contra scandal, narrowly avoiding prosecution when he was hospitalized less than 24 hours before Congress called on him to testify. He died of a brain tumor soon after.

Casey's vampiric persona bears little resemblance to presidential candidate Joe Biden, a career politician who has spent close to four decades in Congress cultivating an image of patriotism, trustworthiness, and bipartisanship. But records in the [CIA CREST archive](#), unsealed in 2017, detail Biden's role in supporting Casey's rise, and ushering in one of the darkest eras of the CIA's history.

In a [classified memo](#) sent to intelligence staff in the early '80s, Casey praised Biden for giving the most serious threat to the CIA's unchecked power—the Justice Department—a good thrashing. Casey highlighted “the tongue lashing [Biden] gave Justice for their passive attitude and general ineffectiveness,” as well as “his demand that if his grey mail legislation which he sponsored was not enough to enable them to go after leaks, they tell them what else needs to be done.”

The partnership between the two careerists was initiated by legislation sponsored by Biden attempting to ban graymailing, a tactic used in leaker trials in which classified documents are requested by the defense during discovery to pressure the government into dropping its case. This legislation would be Biden's entry into a precarious balancing act between surveillance hawks like Casey and a liberal establishment wary of the intelligence community's long history of overreach. Graymail represented for Biden the type of middle-of-the-road, bipartisan legislation that everyone could get behind.

As Casey's comments make clear, Biden decided his graymail legislation didn't go far enough to deter leakers and whistleblowers. At [an informal speech at Stanford](#)—given in part to bolster the CIA's image—Biden told an undergraduate audience that an entire Central American spy network had been compromised by leaks. In the same speech he alluded to Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, American citizens who were executed by electric chair for providing intelligence to the Soviet government. "If you're going to engage in espionage against this country," he said, "be sure it really does jeopardize American society."

This type of public outreach is documented in Casey's memos as a top priority for the CIA to recover its image—tarnished from decades of foreign intervention and domestic maleficence. The Biden charm offensive came just a few years after the [Church Committee's findings](#) on domestic spying operations sunk the CIA in the public consciousness. Like all things political, Biden viewed the CIA's "missteps" not as constituting features of the institution, but rather as an aberration to be corrected, much in the same way he today views the election of our current commander in chief: not as the logical conclusion to decades of disastrous neoliberal policies, but rather as a one-in-a-million fluke.

Biden took a harder line during Casey's 1981 confirmation hearings, if ever so slightly. He [repeatedly pressed Casey](#) for assurances that the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence would maintain oversight on the CIA, and that he would not be edged out. Biden wanted to retain access to classified CIA briefings, and warned Casey of the danger that unchecked "KGB" style surveillance posed to civil liberties and freedoms.

Biden's fear of losing the small measure of power afforded to him by what he would later admit was an impotent and ineffective committee represented an about-face from [the sentiment he had expressed to the ACLU](#) just one year earlier, during a public hearing on the CIA's charter. "Let me tell you something, fellas," he said to a panel of riled-up ACLU lawyers criticizing the agency. "The folks don't care. The average American couldn't care less right now about any of this ... you keep talking about public concern [about the CIA]. There ain't none."

And while Biden pressed Casey more than any of his colleagues during the director's confirmation hearing, his questions reflect the special brand of damning leniency that only Joe Biden is capable of. [After heaping lavish praise](#) on Casey's record, Biden asked him if his personal relationship with the president would cause a conflict of interest, whether he would disclose covert operations to the committee like "planting a bug in the room of the president of Mars," and what report card the soon-to-be-confirmed CIA director would give the committee. On the last point, Casey replied, "Well, you know, I don't like to disagree with you, Senator, but the truth is I thought I'd let the committee investigate me before I undertook to investigate it."

Just months after Casey's confirmation, in the wake of the revelation that Casey [had failed to disclose](#) to the committee "nine investments valued at more than a quarter of a million dollars, personal debts and contingent liabilities of nearly \$500,000, a number of corporations or foundations on whose board Mr. Casey served, four civil lawsuits and more than 70 clients he had represented in private practice in the last five years," Biden [admonished him](#) for displaying "a consistent pattern of omissions, misstatements and contradictions." But as with Biden's record on busing, drugs, incarceration, and the Anita Hill hearings, his reversal came too little, too late. The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence

ultimately found that Casey was “not unfit” to continue in his role, and in doing so allowed a key player in the Iran-Contra scandal to continue on in his role unchecked.

Biden’s comments to Casey during the confirmation hearing make clear that he was aware of the risks the intelligence chief posed to civil liberties and the healthy separation of the branches of government. He knew full well that Casey—who had only accepted the directorship under the promise that he would have influence over foreign policy—was to Reagan what Dick Cheney was to George W. Bush. Yet he ultimately failed to vote against Casey, in what should be recognized as the most defining and consistent feature of his political career: bipartisanship. Despite articulating the very dangers which would later come to pass—Casey covering for Reagan, lying to the committee, and failing to disclose covert operations—Biden weighed the political worth of voting against Casey, determined that it was easier to play nice, and decided to roll over in bed with his Republican colleagues rather than cause a fuss.

While Casey and Biden were first united in their hatred of leakers, their perspectives diverged as the ’80s wore on. Casey advocated for more subtle and insidious ways of targeting leakers and the journalists who covered them, while Biden endorsed a Manichean application of the Espionage Act—still used today to obliterate the lives of “bad” whistleblowers.

Casey died before he could testify to Congress about his role in Iran-Contra, but his rap sheet is seeded with some of the CIA’s most egregious acts of terror and coercion, including the distribution of the [Human Resource Exploitation Manual](#) to the Honduran government (used in the torture and murder of hundreds of left-wing dissidents), the invasion of Grenada, and the 1986 Haitian election coup.

The CIA and its assemblage of operatives, directors, and informants are easy targets for the ire of anyone with even a dim awareness of the terror and harm they have caused. But none of these crimes could have come to pass without the combination of tacit and explicit approval from politicians like Joe Biden, charged with regulating an arm of government defined by its will to crush democracy at home and abroad.

It’s unclear whether Biden’s record with Casey has been recapitulated in recent memory, but if his personal efforts to block [Edward Snowden’s](#) attempts to claim asylum are anything to go by, it would seem that his relationship with the intelligence community hasn’t changed much in the 30-plus years since Casey’s death. Biden has staunchly supported corporate whistleblowers’ rights while aligning himself with the Obama administration’s expanded policy charter of punishing (or in the case of Snowden, seeking to punish) the whistleblowers bringing to light the intelligence community’s authoritarian and illegal surveillance practices.

Biden’s stance is now out in the open for all to see as the whistleblower-led impeachment picks up steam. As long as the whistleblower can find some measure of bipartisan support, he or she is one of the good ones. As long as the whistleblower doesn’t upend the entrenched forms of power that Biden sees as essential to our democracy, they can stay. And so long as they follow the protocols which make it next to impossible to legally leak information, they can count Uncle Joe as a friend.

As Biden continues to explain his voting record, his contribution to William Casey’s tenure and his troubling stance on whistleblowers should also be included in the long list of

decisions for which he must answer, and which continue to haunt our democracy.

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