

Obama's Intelligence Agenda

More of the Same from the "Change Administration"

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Global Research, November 14, 2008

[Antifascist Calling](#) 14 November 2008

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

While expectations may be high that the incoming Obama administration will reverse many of the worst features of the Bush regime—from warrantless wiretapping, illegal detention, torture, “targeted assassinations” and preemptive war—now that the cheering has stopped, expect more of the same.

According to [The Wall Street Journal](#), “President-elect Barack Obama is unlikely to radically overhaul controversial Bush administration intelligence policies, advisers say, an approach that is almost certain to create tension within the Democratic Party.”

With hyperbolic “change” rhetoric in the air, Obama is relying on a gaggle of former intelligence insiders, warmed-over Clinton administration officials and “moderate” Republicans, many of whom helped Bush craft his administration’s illegal policies.

With U.S. street cred at an all-time low, due in no small measure to Washington’s hubristic fantasies that it really *is* an empire and not a rapidly decaying *failed state*, ruling elites have literally banked on Obama to deliver the goods.

During his run for the White House, the Illinois senator may have mildly criticized some of the administration’s so-called “counterterrorism” policies including the Bushist penchant for secrecy, the disappearance of “terrorist” suspects, driftnet surveillance of American citizens and legal residents, CIA “black site” gulags and the crushing of domestic dissent.

But in the few scant days since the November 4 general election, the contours of what Democratic party corporatist gifters will roll-out come January 20 are taking shape. Citing Obama’s carefully-crafted public relations blitz on the campaign trail opposing illegal spying, the *Journal* reports:

Yet he ... voted for a White House-backed law to expand eavesdropping powers for the National Security Agency. Mr. Obama said he opposed providing legal immunity to telecommunications companies that aided warrantless surveillance, but ultimately voted for the bill, which included an immunity provision.

The new president could take a similar approach to revising the rules for CIA interrogations, said one current government official familiar with the transition. Upon review, Mr. Obama may decide he wants to keep the road open in certain cases for the CIA to use techniques not approved by the military, but with much greater oversight. (Siobhan Gorman, “Intelligence Policy to Stay Largely Intact,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 11, 2008)

The “current government official” cited by the *Journal* fails to specify precisely what it means to “keep the road open” when it comes to torturing prisoners of war in violation of the Geneva Conventions.

Considering that top Bush administration officials “repeatedly discussed and approved specific details of exactly how high-value al Qaeda suspects would be interrogated by the Central Intelligence Agency,” as *ABC News* [reported](#) back in April, and that “high-level discussions about these ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ were so detailed ... some of the interrogation sessions were almost choreographed—down to the number of times CIA agents would use a specific tactic,” one is left to ponder what “much greater oversight” would actually mean.

Perhaps such “oversight” entails a cosmetic shake-up at the top rungs of U.S. intelligence agencies? *The Washington Post* [reports](#) that “The nation’s top two intelligence officers expect to be replaced by President-elect Barack Obama early in his administration, according to senior intelligence officials.”

But would the replacement of Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell, a former admiral who oversaw spooky Booz Allen Hamilton corporate contracts with the “intelligence community,” and CIA Director Michael V. Hayden, an Air Force general who implemented Bushist warrantless wiretapping programs while NSA Director, represent “change” or continuity?

While some Democrats may oppose retaining America’s top spooks because of their public support of Bushist policies, “other Democrats and many intelligence experts,” according to the *Post* “give high marks to the current cadre of intelligence leaders, crediting them with restoring stability and professionalism to a community rocked by multiple scandals in recent years.”

With a subtext arguing in favor of retaining McConnell and Hayden, *Post* journalists Walter Pincus (who has a dubious history of collaboration with the CIA as researchers Daniel Brandt and Steve Badrich [note](#)) and Karen DeYoung, cite unnamed “intelligence officials” who think their early departure “could be seen as politicizing their offices and setting a precedent for automatic turnover when the White House changes hands.”

Hilariously (though I’m not laughing), Pincus and DeYoung cite the case of Bush’s retention of George J. Tenet as CIA Director as a “stabilizing move,” one viewed favorably within the Agency. Tenet, a Clinton appointee and political insider was a primary architect of intelligence forgeries, along with Bushist minions in the Pentagon and the Office of the Vice President when “the intelligence and the facts were being fixed around the policy,” prior to the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq.

According to the *Post*, both men have expressed interest in keeping their perches atop the U.S. “intelligence community.” And why wouldn’t they? According to [Secrecy News](#) the October 28 release by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence revealed that the 2008 budget for the National Intelligence Program amounted to \$47.5 billion, not counting an additional \$10 billion in spending on the Pentagon’s Military Intelligence Program.

It should be kept in mind the \$57.5 billion doesn’t include the Pentagon and other intelligence agency’s “black budget” for undisclosed programs and “special operations” hidden within ultra-secretive “special access programs” (SAPs) kept off the books. According

to defense and security analyst William M. Arkin,

There are also additional categories “above” Top Secret called “special access programs” that are used to protect presidential, military, intelligence, anti-terrorism, counter-drug, special operations, and “sensitive activities,” as well as classified research and development efforts where it is deemed that extraordinary secrecy is needed to protect capabilities and vulnerabilities. Special access programs are regulated by statute and are defined as deliberately designated programs where “need-to-know” or access controls beyond those normally provided to classified information are created. The clearance and access requirements are identical to, or exceed, those required for access to sensitive compartmented information, and SAPs require special (and expensive) security, access, and communications measures. (William M. Arkin, *Code Names: Deciphering U.S. Military Plans, Programs, and Operations in the 9/11 World*, Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2005, p.18)

Additionally, we have no way of determining what other secret slush funds are available to the “intelligence community” from a welter of illegal ventures such as the laundering of illicit funds by CIA intelligence assets in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Balkans, Colombia and Mexico. Derived from the international narcotics trade and “cleansed” as they pass through a series of off-shore banks and U.S. financial institutions, far-right narco-trafficking assets involved in the murder of trade unionists, journalists, leftist opponents or indeed, the 9/11 attacks which kick-started America’s “war on terror,” are readily available for planetary-wide U.S. “special operations.”

The Obama intelligence transition team is led by former National Counterterrorism chief John Brennan and former CIA intelligence analysis director Jami Miscik, according to the *Journal*. But what the *Journal* fails to mention however, is that Brennan was a former president and CEO of the The Analysis Corporation ([TAC](#)) and the first chairman of the Intelligence and National Security Alliance ([INSA](#)), as investigative journalist Tim Shorrock reported in his essential book, [Spies For Hire](#).

Much of TAC’s business is with the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) where Brennan worked for three years. As Shorrock points out, “In fact, the NCTC is one of the company’s largest customers, and TAC provides counterterrorism support to ‘most of the agencies within the Intelligence Community,’ according to a company press release.”

During the 1990s, TAC developed the U.S. government’s first terrorist database, called Tipoff, for the State Department. In 2003, management of the database was transferred to the NCTC which Brennan managed. By 2005 Tipoff had morphed into the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE), the mother of all federal counterterrorism databases and the “wellspring” for watch lists distributed to airlines, law enforcement, border posts and U.S. consulates world-wide. According to Shorrock, in 2005 TAC won a \$2.3 million contract in partnership with CACI International “to integrate information from the Defense Intelligence Agency into the TIDE database.”

INSA, according to Shorrock is one of *three* “business associations representing intelligence contractors” and the “one with the closet ties to the government,” which “primarily represents contractors working for the NSA and the CIA.” And SourceWatch [reports](#) that among INSA’s leading members can be found such corporate heavy-hitters as the scandal-plagued BAE Systems, Booz Allen Hamilton, Computer Science Corporation, General Dynamics, Hewlett-Packard Company, Lockheed Martin, ManTech International Corporation,

Microsoft and Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC). Indeed, current DNI Mike McConnell, was INSA chairman between 2005-2007 before heading up the Office of National Intelligence.

According the *The Washington Post*, Brennan “is one of several names that have surfaced, including Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), as possible replacements for McConnell or Hayden.” One can almost hear the clink of glasses amid popping corks in corporate suites across Virginia and Washington!

What do we know about Jami Miscik, Obama’s other intelligence transition team leader? According to the Council on Foreign Relations ([CFR](#)), Miscik “served as Director for Intelligence Programs at the National Security Council during the Clinton Administration from 1995 to 1996.” In the run up to the Iraq war, Miscik played a key role in concocting fake intelligence about Iraq’s alleged “weapons of mass destruction” and “links” to al Qaeda that were used by the Bush administration to sell the war to the American people. During this period, as head of the CIA’s analytical division she suppressed reports from Company analysts that rejected Bushist claims as unfounded.

More recently, Miscik was “the Global Head of Sovereign Risk at Lehman Brothers” according to the CFR. “In this capacity,” Miscik’s biographers write with a straight face, “she assesses geopolitical and economic risks for the firm’s senior management and clients.” But with the multi-billion dollar collapse of Lehman Brothers amid allegations of massive fraud and management corruption, the failed firm is now under investigation for dodgy “structured products” and “mini-bonds.” One can only wonder what advice the incoming Obama administration would seek from Miscik or indeed from CFR!

Once the Obama team is in place come January 20, will the crimes of the Bush regime be investigated by Congress or will gross criminality be prosecuted by a new team at the Department of Justice? Don’t hold your breath.

The Washington Post [reports](#) that while “political considerations affected every crevice of the department during the Bush years,” Ron Klain, Al Gore’s former chief of staff who now occupies that position for Vice President-elect Joe Biden, dismissed calls to overhaul the Department and compared “preelection brainstorming sessions of Democrats” to “an escalating composition of woes.” *Post* reporter Carrie Johnson writes,

Obama will have to do a careful balancing act. At a conference in Washington this week, former department criminal division chief Robert S. Litt asked that the new administration avoid fighting old battles that could be perceived as vindictive, such as seeking to prosecute government officials involved in decisions about interrogation and the gathering of domestic intelligence. Human rights groups have called for such investigations, as has House Judiciary Committee Chairman John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.).

“It would not be beneficial to spend a lot of time calling people up to Congress or in front of grand juries,” Litt said. “It would really spend a lot of the bipartisan capital Obama managed to build up.” (Carrie Johnson, “Obama Team Face Major Task in Justice Dept. Overhaul,” *The Washington Post*, November 13, 2008)

But as we’ve come to expect from the corporate media, Johnson failed to investigate Litt’s

own conflicts of interest when it comes to probing Bushist crimes by CIA and other intelligence officials. As Glenn Greenwald [observes](#), “This brazen defense of lawlessness articulated by Litt is now as close to a unanimous, bipartisan consensus across the political establishment as it gets.”

Indeed, Litt’s argument in favor of impunity for mass murder, torture and lawless spying by high political officials, particularly the President and those closet to him such as Vice President Richard Cheney, mean they literally *are* exempt from the rule of law.

Greenwald reports that during his tenure at the Justice Department as the head of the criminal division under Bill Clinton, Litt

...spent much of his career as a federal prosecutor, aggressively prosecuting and imprisoning all sorts of ordinary Americans. He was one of the most vocal advocates for prohibiting government-proof encryption technology in order to preserve the Government’s ability to access people’s computer communications as part of criminal investigations, and was part of a Clinton DOJ that very aggressively pursued even garden-variety drug cases and used mandatory sentencing guidelines to ensure harsher sentences for common criminals. (Glenn Greenwald, “Post-Partisan Harmony vs. the Rule of Law, Salon, November 13, 2008)

While prosecuting and imprisoning low-level drug offenders and the poor is an absolute moral obligation for Litt and his ilk, hauling lawbreaking corporate and political clients before a court of law, like the impeachment of felons occupying high-office, is “off the table.” Greenwald points out that as a partner at [Arnold & Porter](#), an “up-armored” corporate legal behemoth, the company brazenly announced on Litt’s Arnold & Porter [page](#) that he represented several employees of intelligence agencies “in connection with criminal investigations. None has been charged.”

While the *Post* may depict him as an objective analyst, Litt is no more than a shill for well-heeled, “covered” clients. Indeed, if he represents CIA, NSA or White House officials involved in illegal intelligence and surveillance programs Greenwald writes, “that obviously motivates his insistence that investigations not be pursued.” And so it goes...

Memo to Obama supporters: the new product roll-out is a smashing success, “change” has come to Washington, the corporate grift continues. Any questions?

Tom Burghardt is a researcher and activist based in the San Francisco Bay Area. In addition to publishing in Covert Action Quarterly and [Global Research](#), an independent research and media group of writers, scholars, journalists and activists based in Montreal, his articles can be read on [Dissident Voice](#), [The Intelligence Daily](#) and [Pacific Free Press](#). He is the editor of Police State America: U.S. Military “Civil Disturbance” Planning, distributed by [AK Press](#).

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