

Avril Haines: Scientist, Spy Chief, Apologist for Torture? Meet Biden's New Director of National Intelligence

Avril Haines created the legal framework for Obama's drone policy, as well as legal cover for CIA agents involved in torture.

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Joe Biden announced last week that he will nominate Avril Haines to the position of Director of National Intelligence. Haines provided legal cover for CIA agents and worked closely with Barack Obama and CIA Director John Brennan on Obama's [tenfold expansion of drone killings](#).

If confirmed by Congress, Haines will be the first woman to head up the coalition of 17 intelligence agencies ranging from the National Security Agency to the FBI and the State Department, all under the umbrella of the DNI.

"If she gets word of a threat coming to our shores, like another pandemic or foreign interference in our elections, she will not stop raising alarms until the right people take action. People will be able to take her word because she always calls it as she sees it," said Joe Biden when announcing Haines' nomination.

Haines is billed as someone who speaks "[truth to power](#)." It's an ironic about-face for the person who decided not to punish those who hacked into the computers of Senate staffers investigating the CIA's torture program. Haines' "accountability board" spared CIA personnel from having to answer for their use of torture, and her team redacted the board findings.

Yet Haines is being touted by former Obama administration officials for allegedly making the drone program "more responsible."

"This is a pretty ominous signal about what is to come" in a Biden administration, a Senate staffer who works on national security issues [told](#) The Daily Beast. "To have [Haines] touted for her record in advancing human rights and respect for the rule of law I don't think can be adequately squared with not only her record but her deliberate choices of advocacy."

Whatever policy changes Haines implemented, far too often U.S. drone strikes killed civilians and turned [weddings into funerals](#). The standards fell "far short of the standards for

transparency and accountability needed to ensure that the government's targeted killing program is lawful under domestic and international law," [according](#) to the American Civil Liberties Union.

Haines also supported the controversial nomination of waterboarding proponent Gina Haspel, who had direct supervision over the CIA's torture program, as first female director of the CIA under President Trump.

"If Haines couldn't even oppose the appointment of a torturer as CIA director, how can she be expected to rein in American intelligence agencies' abuses of power?" [asks](#) The Guardian.

After a detail to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee put Haines on Biden's radar in late 2010, she moved to the White House, where she eventually chaired the interagency lawyers' group that created the legal framework for "targeted killings"—i.e. drone strikes.

She quickly partnered with White House counterterrorism adviser and former CIA officer John Brennan.

"We wanted to make sure that the counterterrorism program and any type of lethal strikes that we might take would be very sharply caverned within a framework that made certain stipulations [and] criteria before any strike was taken," [said](#) Brennan.

Despite the tenfold increase in drone strikes under the Obama administration, Brennan framed their roles as one of "limiting strikes."

"Avril and I bore the scars of a lot of the pushback that we received from counterterrorism proponents that wanted to have more latitude in carrying out strikes," he said.

"Former Obama aides have retroactively sought to cast [Haines] as a voice of restraint and protecting civilians, but this revisionism...is undeserved," tweeted Sarah Lazare, editor of In These Times. "Whatever supposed safeguards Haines included to limit harm to civilians, they didn't work. The effect of the presidential policy guidance she co-authored was to turn the world into a US battlefield & normalize drone war that was, and continues to be, extremely lethal for civilians."

Samantha Power, former ambassador to the United Nations, disagrees.

"When someone doesn't get everything they seek inside the U.S. government, critics can say 'that person is legitimating policy by improving it,'" [said](#) Power, "but the fact of the matter is that more innocent civilians would have died and a far wider set of targets would have been pursued without the changes that she secured."

In op-eds strewn throughout the media, Haines has been recast as a scientist, spy chief, and supergirl, with a life like "a movie script."

“Avril Haines’ appointment will make America — and the world — safer,” [gushes](#) CNN national security analyst Samantha Vinograd. “Her incredible background — including her love of science, flying planes and brown belt in judo — may read like a movie script, but it’s real. Among her other accomplishments, she’s a skilled lawyer, a physicist and has been described by a colleague as someone who ‘may quite literally be the nicest person any of us have ever met.’”

CNN’s write-up is notably similar to this one in the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

Avril Haines’ journey to the top of the national security world reads more like a movie script than the path of a woman about to make history as America’s first female spy chief. Long before President-elect Joe Biden nominated her this week to be his Director of National Intelligence, Haines mastered judo at an elite academy in Tokyo, learnt to fly planes while studying physics in Chicago and opened a bookstore in Baltimore that occasionally hosted readings of erotic literature.

“While much news coverage has dwelled on her quirky life history – she rebuilt a plane! She’s a brown belt! She owned a bookstore! – she also played a key role in overseeing the drone strike program under Obama,” [points out](#) *The Guardian*’s Nathan Robinson. “This should be completely disqualifying, because Obama’s use of drones was a national disgrace. There has been very little accountability or acknowledgment of how bad it was. Anyone involved with the program should have been prosecuted. Instead they’re being rewarded.”

Vinograd says that she worked with Haines during the Obama administration and that Haines won’t get political like Richard Grenell and current DNI John Ratcliffe have, in her telling.

“In the time that I worked with her, I never once heard her mention politics or party or anything of that sort,” she writes. “In the wake of Trump’s undermining of the intelligence community, Haines’ track record of apolitical public service will help her restore the soul of the intelligence community which, at its core, is supposed to speak truth to power.”

In her glowing op-ed, Vinograd omits Haines’ role in sparing CIA personnel accountability for torture and hacking Senate computers. Others are not so quick to forget. The *New York Times* [reports](#) that Haines “is likely to win confirmation in a sharply divided Senate but encounter hard criticisms from the left.”

The selection of Haines to lead DNI is “very” concerning, national security investigative journalist Gareth Porter told *The American Conservative*, and particularly if the Biden administration “continues the forever wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria and Africa, as [I] expect it will.”

“Not only did [Haines] show an absence of ethical values in her role in the Obama White House, but she will have a powerful bureaucratic self-interest in maximizing the drone strikes, which have occupied a major share of the CIA’s staffing in the past,” he said.

Haines’ drone limits weren’t “sufficient,” and on “the torture report, she was part of an

administration that was much more hostile to the Senate's [investigation] efforts than was warranted," said Katherine Hawkins, senior legal analyst for Project on Government Oversight, in an interview with *The American Conservative*. Haines "signed off on the CIA's decision to exonerate itself for spying on and making a false criminal referral about the Senate staff...."

Biden undoubtedly chose Haines because she is a "familiar face," points out Hawkins. The open question is whether Biden and Haines recognize that the U.S. is in a "very different moment" now, as a war-weary public faces the COVID-19 pandemic.

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