

US Senate approves John Brennan, tied to torture and drone assassination, as CIA director

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John Brennan, the mastermind of the Obama administration's drone assassination program, was confirmed by the US Senate as CIA director on Thursday by a vote of 63 to 34. The confirmation, which comes as no surprise, is another step in the direction of extra-constitutional, dictatorial rule in the United States.

Four years ago, Brennan was considered by Barack Obama for the CIA position, but his association with torture under George W. Bush made his nomination "politically difficult," as the *New York Times* euphemistically puts it. The Obama administration today, along with the US Congress, has no such qualms.

The vast majority of Democrats in the Senate voted for Brennan's nomination, along with a handful of Republicans. Obama immediately praised the vote, saying, "The Senate has recognized in John the qualities I value so much."

The vote followed a quarrel within the political establishment over the claim by the Obama administration that it has the authority to assassinate American citizens on US soil without trial or charges being laid. The tremors the debate set off are indicative of the depth of the political crisis in the US and the great concern of the ruling elite to conceal its preparations for police-state dictatorship from the American population.

In a March 4 letter to Sen. Rand Paul, the Kentucky Republican, US Attorney General Eric Holder declared that the Obama administration considered itself empowered "to authorize the military to use lethal force within the territory of the United States" against American citizens.

At a Senate hearing on Wednesday, Holder agreed with Sen. Lindsey Graham, Republican from South Carolina, that the American government had been given Congressional authorization to launch military attacks against opponents in "the homeland."

On Wednesday Paul carried out a 13-hour filibuster, which blocked Brennan's confirmation vote, insisting on a response from the attorney general as to whether government officials believed they had had the right to kill American citizens without due process.

During his filibuster, Paul raised the explosive issue of whether the Obama administration considered it had the authority to launch drone strikes on political opponents, pointing to the anti-Vietnam War protest movement as an example. The Kentucky Republican asked at one point, "Is objection to the policy of your government sympathizing with the enemy? ... Are you just going to drop a Hellfire missile on Jane Fonda?", referring to the actress who opposed American imperialist intervention in Southeast Asia during the late 1960s and early

1970s.

Rand is a right-wing figure, associated with “libertarian” elements, and a dedicated enemy of the working class and social progress. However, he was asking questions that provoked consternation within the Obama administration and Congress, because they got too close to the heart of the matter for comfort: that Holder’s March 4 letter was a green light, for example, under conditions of widespread social turmoil, for the president to suppress political opposition through murder.

At a Thursday press briefing, White House press secretary Jay Carney revealed that Attorney General Holder had written a second, three-sentence letter to Paul. This is the entire text:

“Dear Senator Paul: It has come to my attention that you have now asked an additional question: ‘Does the President have the authority to use a weaponized drone to kill an American not engaged in combat on American soil?’ The answer to that question is no.”

Carney told the media, “The president has not and would not use drone strikes against American citizens on American soil.”

Holder’s dismissive and arrogant letter should be treated with the skepticism and contempt it deserves.

First of all, his new message contradicts the March 4 letter, responding to a question *specifically about drone strikes*, in which Holder wrote that it was indeed possible “to imagine an extraordinary circumstance in which it would be necessary and appropriate under the Constitution and applicable laws of the United States for the President to authorize the military to use lethal force [i.e., drones] within the territory of the United States.”

Second, the March 7 letter takes for granted that the US president has the right to order the assassination of just about anyone, anywhere, except for American citizens on US soil not engaged in combat. This is already a radically authoritarian and reactionary claim, only made by imperial rulers, who determine by a hand signal who lives and who dies.

Is there any reason to have the slightest confidence in Holder’s supposed change of heart? The denial comes from an administration carrying out illegal and murderous daily drone strikes in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and elsewhere, which have already killed US citizens, on the basis of infamous “kill lists.” The Obama government, moreover, has maintained the institutionalized torture in Guantanamo Bay and relentlessly attempted to destroy Bradley Manning. No one should doubt its willingness and capacity to launch attacks, pre-emptive or otherwise, on political opposition within the United States.

In any event, the phrase “engaged in combat” is elastic enough, from the point of view of the American establishment, to include mass protest, political strikes and efforts to create new, more democratic organs of political power. Moreover, the US military regularly categorizes as “combatants” anyone it kills, deliberately or accidentally, in air or drone strikes. Will the Pentagon stop telling lies at the borders of the United States?

Holder’s second letter reflects nervousness about popular opposition to the government’s claims of dictatorial power, but should do nothing to assuage it. There were other efforts on Thursday to close down and cool off the debate.

Paul's reference to the possible murder of Jane Fonda elicited angry and anxious comments from Graham and Sen. John McCain, the Arizona Republican, both of whom have close associations with the military and intelligence apparatus.

McCain attacked Rand Paul for his "rant," adding: "I don't think what happened yesterday was helpful to the American people." According to the Associated Press, McCain "derided that notion of an attack against the actress [Fonda] and argued that Paul was unnecessarily making Americans fear that their government poses a danger."

The Arizona senator continued, "To somehow allege or infer that the president of the United States is going to kill somebody like Jane Fonda or somebody who disagrees with the policies is a stretch of imagination which is, frankly, ridiculous." In fact, Holder's letter and the ensuing discussions make crystal clear that such things are already being discussed by the White House, military and CIA.

Graham criticized Republicans who took the opportunity to grandstand at Obama's expense by supporting Rand's filibuster. The South Carolina Senator said that Obama had the "good judgment to understand we're at war. To my party: I'm a bit disappointed that you no longer apparently think we're at war." He also said on the Senate floor, "To my Republican colleagues, I don't remember any of you coming down here suggesting that President Bush was going to kill anybody with a drone."

Graham was effusive in his praise for the Obama administration during Wednesday's hearings involving Holder. On Thursday, he called the vote for Brennan a "referendum on the drone program."

Paul, for his part, once he received the terse reply from the attorney general and after the scolding from McCain and Graham, packed up his tent and described himself as satisfied and "victorious." Ridiculously, he told the media, "I'm quite happy with the answer [i.e., Holder's letter] ...Through the advise and consent process, I've got an important answer."

That US senators are openly discussing the assassination of left-wing political opponents is absolutely extraordinary. This, along with the bipartisan support for Obama, the drone program and Brennan's nomination, are a further dire warning about the state of political affairs in the US, increasingly a democracy in name only.

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