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Booted spy crisis puts White House, CIA ties under strain

14/07/2014



The transatlantic feud comes amid a bleak six-month stretch of international crises that appear to have caught the United States flat-footed as well as at a time of skirmishes between the White House and some of the intelligence community's career operatives.

U.S. intelligence agencies have never been strangers to ugly controversies, from attempts to assassinate Cuba's Fidel Castro, to the use of interrogation practices that meet international definitions of torture, or the case for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. They have also faced charges of incompetence, like the failure to predict the fall of the Soviet Union.

By those historical standards, 2014 hasn't been a disaster. But the often testy relationship between spies and politicians is definitely going through a bad patch – and it may only get worse.

The last half-year has featured the shocking rampage of an al-Qaida offshoot, the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIL), in Syria and Iraq, Russia's dramatic annexation of Crimea, the White House's accidental but headline-grabbing outing of the CIA station chief in Afghanistan, and an unprecedented war of words in which one of the agency's most reliable congressional champions, Senator Dianne Feinstein, accused it of spying on legislative staff.

Not everyone agrees that the relationship is passing through an unusually difficult period. Senator Saxby Chambliss, the top Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee, praised CIA Director John Brennan.

"I think John is working hard to make sure our intelligence community functions in a way that the White House and policymakers want to see it work," Chambliss told Yahoo News. "You have bumps in the road in any organization and John's trying to smooth those out."

The latest news out of Germany has roots in the stunning disclosures from former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, which began a little more than a year ago. Already, German Chancellor Angela Merkel had openly expressed anger upon learning that U.S. intelligence eavesdropped on her cell phone calls. And the White House's response – a [clumsily worded denial that served to confirm the charges](#) – did nothing to soothe seething tempers in Berlin.

On Thursday, German government spokesman Steffen Seibert tied [the expulsion of the CIA station chief](#) to two new formal investigations into suspected American espionage in Germany and the broader dispute over how much Washington spies on its allies.

Seibert said it was "crucial for Germany, in the interest of the security of its citizens and its troops abroad, to work closely on a basis of trust with Western partners, in particular with the USA".

"However, mutual trust and openness are required," he scolded.

At the White House, National Security Council spokeswoman Caitlin Hayden offered "no comment on a purported intelligence matter" but said U.S.-German national security cooperation was critical. "It is essential that cooperation continue in all areas and we will continue to be in touch with the German government in appropriate channels," she said in a statement.

The dispute has deepened mutual mistrust between the CIA and the White House. [The New York Times cited unnamed White House officials](#) as saying that the president did not know when he picked up the telephone to speak to Merkel on July 3 that, just a day earlier, Germany had arrested one of its own intelligence operatives for allegedly passing secrets to Washington. The Times report was notable in part because it cited one anonymous source as openly considering the possibility that Brennan knew but failed to brief the White House.

That angered some career intelligence officials who suggested that the White House was scapegoating Brennan. White House officials would not discuss the matter.

"There's not a White House that's ever existed that isn't willing to point the finger, point the blame, at the intelligence community rather than taking the blame itself," a former senior intelligence official told Yahoo News. "That's exactly what's happening. The White House is trying to deflect blame from them, back to the agency."

An informed source underlined one irony: Brennan infuriated some of his current colleagues at the CIA when he was the White House's top counter-terrorism advisor by writing a scathing report criticizing the intelligence community's handling of the so-called "Underwear Bomber" plot on Christmas Day in 2009.

Obama aides acknowledge some institutional tensions but say Obama's personal relationship with Brennan is solid, and underline that the president personally asked Director of National Intelligence James Clapper to stay on after the 2012 elections.

They also underline the unusually vast array of problems on the intelligence community's plate, and argue that the best measure of its performance – and the relationship with policymakers -- is the absence of terrorist attacks on the United States.

CIA spokesman Dean Boyd told Yahoo News that the agency, and the intelligence community more broadly, "successfully work together with the White House and Congress every day to address the vast array of national security threats facing our nation."

But the tensions also exist at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue. [The Justice Department announced Thursday](#) it would not launch a formal criminal investigation into a furious feud pitting the CIA against the Senate Intelligence Committee.

That came after the extraordinary spectacle of the committee accusing the agency of spying on staffers working on a still-secret report about the CIA use of torture. The CIA accused committee staff of stealing classified documents.

"The department carefully reviewed the matters referred to us and did not find sufficient evidence to warrant a criminal investigation," Justice Department spokesman Peter Carr said in a statement.

The announcement seemed unlikely to quiet the dispute between the agency and one of the committees to which it answers.

"I still believe that the CIA's entry into our computers was unacceptable, perhaps even unconstitutional. And we shouldn't let this drop until we have some fundamental resolution of what happened," said Senator Mark Udall (D.-Colorado), who sits on the committee and has frequently accused the intelligence community of overreach.

And the underlying battle – whether and how to make public the committee's report on the CIA's use of torture in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001 – still has lawmakers and the CIA at odds.

"At the heart of this is the need still to declassify the committee's report on the rendition and enhanced interrogation techniques that the CIA engaged in in the last decade," Udall told reporters. "We need to remove that stain."

Feinstein, the California Democrat who chairs the committee, said she was "pleased" by the Justice Department's decision not to investigate her staff.

"I believe this is the right decision and will allow the committee to focus on the upcoming release of its report on the CIA detention and interrogation program," she said in a statement that did not mention the department's decision not to pursue the CIA.

The fight between the CIA and the committee over whether and how to make that report public has damaged relations between the agency and one of its most reliable defenders.

"That has so poisoned the well that I don't think it's fixable until that issue gets resolved," said a former senior intelligence official. "It is as bad a strain as I've ever seen in years."

The most surprising national security development of 2014 to date may be the extremist ISIL insurgency's surge in Iraq, where it has carved out a vast swath of land and claimed to

establish an Islamist state.

Intelligence officials underline that they have been warning policymakers for years about the rise of that brutal al-Qaida splinter group and about the frail state of Iraqi government forces. Some policymakers say privately that while the intelligence on ISIL was thorough, they felt the warnings about [just how weak Iraq's military had become](#) were neither loud nor precise enough.

That is by no means a uniformly held view among key players in Congress.

"I think that Iraq was not an intelligence failure," Chambliss told Yahoo News. "It was a failure on the part of the leadership of the Iraqi forces."

"You can always point your finger at causes that sometimes are correct and sometimes are not so correct when something like this happens, but I think overall John has done a good job in trying to make sure the agency runs very efficiently and very effectively," the senator added.

Policymakers have also questioned whether the intelligence community missed signs that Russian President Vladimir Putin had [decided to annex Ukraine's strategic Crimean Peninsula](#).

Intelligence officials who spoke to Yahoo News on condition of anonymity said lawmakers and the president were repeatedly told that Russia had amassed the forces necessary to annex Crimea, but acknowledged that they did not predict Putin's decision.

"In the months leading up to the Russian incursion into Ukraine, the IC [intelligence community] produced a series of assessments examining the political situation in Ukraine and Russian reactions to the growing crisis, including possible scenarios for a Russian military intervention," a senior U.S. intelligence official told Yahoo News. In February, analysts "produced analysis that identified Crimea as a likely flashpoint and focused on the tripwires that would lead Russia to intervene."

One congressional aide countered that the intelligence scenarios for Ukraine included "so many red lines" that might trigger a Russian invasion that the analysis lost its predictive value.

The complaints often run in both directions. Intelligence officials have continued to complain about the White House after it [unintentionally outed the CIA station chief in Afghanistan](#) over Memorial Day weekend.

"Amateur hour. Total, absolute amateur hour," said one recently retired national security official.

The strains are "cumulative," another former senior intelligence official explained. "It builds on the sense in the intelligence community that the White House let NSA hang out to dry on their issues one year ago, and did not come to their defense right away. And then there's the sense in the intelligence community that the White House is not allowing those parts of the US government that go after terrorists to go after terrorists with the kind of freedom that those parts of the US government would like."

Obama has defended the NSA in several major speeches, arguing that his administration has struck the right balance between privacy rights and the need to gather information.

Then there's the strange case of Bowe Bergdahl, the Army sergeant recently freed in a prisoner exchange with the Taliban. Obama picked Clapper to be the intelligence community's

representative to the discussions about the operation, irking career CIA officials angry about being left out of the loop on one of the most controversial prisoner exchanges in U.S. history.

In a statement to Yahoo News, Obama's top homeland security and counterterrorism adviser, Lisa Monaco, said the president was "proud of the men and women of our intelligence community and the work that they do.

"They are dedicated patriots who keep our nation, our interests, and our friends and partners safe," Monaco said. "They are without question the best in the world at what they do, and the president is extraordinarily well-served by their analysis as he makes tough policy decisions and fulfills his duties as commander-in-chief."

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