

The Revolt of the US Intelligence Community: Future Battles with President Donald Trump

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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Factionalism and fury are basic ingredients of the US Republic. Designed as a classic response to the lynch mob fantasy of direct democracy, and the weakness of unaccountable monarchy, those behind the US constitution contrived a select form of paternal snobbery: letting groups fight it out in the amphitheatre of politics. Such a battle would always adhere to certain demarcations of power along the separation of powers.

This was all well and good, bar one fundamental problem. The State blossomed and ballooned. Bureaucracy became both purpose and fetish, despite being opposed in a rhetorical way by various presidential administrations and politicians. While US politicians – at least a good number of them – feared the growth of the unelected classes within the US government system, the empire’s appetite proved voracious.

Supply met demand. Functionaries were hired; modern foot soldiers were sought for the task of building empire in freedom’s glades. The National Security Agency, child of a new, post-World War empire, grew up alongside the Central Intelligence Agency. A vast intelligence community mushroomed in the dark rhetoric of Cold War doom and nuclear fears.

What, then, of that elusive quantity known as the people? Where would they fit in the administrative schemes of such behemoths? History shows them as subjects to be spied upon and suspected. The security rationale became the necessary shibboleth. Despite various imposed restrictions, warrantless surveillance took place in leaps and bounds, notably after September 11, 2001. The CIA became executor, under President George W. Bush’s watch, of extraordinary rendition and torture.

Now, the intelligence community is again creating its form of mischief. A few days before the inauguration of Donald J. Trump we bore witness to unveiled threats and promises of an internal conflict, the anger of the Washington professionals against the out-of-town entertainers.

It continued the sentiment expressed by former CIA chief Michael J. Morell during the campaign, arguing that the US people were effectively going for a dangerous, destabilising defective.[1] The language is important here, for democracies which do not yield the favoured candidate need, as Henry Kissinger famously noted, direction. The wishes of the voter, in other words, require correction from time to time.

Trump’s critics within the intelligence community see the problem as Trump. But in such criticism lies the most perverse tilt favouring the CIA’s stance. This traditional bug bear of the Left, a body with various nasty character references, suddenly finds common ground

with anti-Trump critics on both sides of the spectrum. Unholy and unruly sympathies seem to be springing up in the untrimmed jungle of US politics. The entire mood there is against Trump, against his legitimacy and, it follows, the nature of the US political system. Who, then, is the emperor without clothes?

Last week's antics gave us a few clues. The outgoing Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, John Brennan, yielded a cranky example. Brennan, in the last few years, has seen himself as the reformer, the moderniser. Recently, he also fumed as school teacher and patriarch against the incoming president.

He was already facing enemies within his own organisation. Attempts to bring the operational side of the organisation closer to the analytical side were efforts that trampled on sacred ground. His stumping proposals sought to integrate four main directorates within the agency: those of operations, analysis, science and technology.[2] It was the analyst desperate to move push up the value of analysis to professional parity with the operations officer.

Trump's sallies against Brennan and the intelligence community set up the scene for the next round of institutional brawling. The intelligence community has been subjected to the trash talk of historical comparisons – and notorious ones at that. “Intelligence agencies,” tweeted Trump, “should never have allowed this fake news to ‘leak’ into the public. One last shot at me. Are we living in Nazi Germany?”[3]

In a series of other tweets, Trump also suggested in responding to Brennan's view of a perceived Russian threat that he could hardly do “much worse – just look at Syria (red line), Crimea, Ukraine and the build-up of Russian nukes. Not good! Was this the leaker of Fake News?”[4]

Brennan then spoke about drawing lines and maintaining perspective. “It's when there are allegations about leaking or about dishonesty or a lack of integrity, that's where I think the line is crossed.”[5] Former CIA deputy chief of staff Nick Shapiro also explained that Brennan was “deeply saddened and angered at Donald Trump's despicable display of self-aggrandizement in front of CIA's Memorial Wall of Agency heroes.”[6]

Trump did make some effort to pour oil on the waters on Saturday, though there are suggestions this did little. “There is nobody that feels stronger about the intelligence community and the CIA than Donald Trump,” claimed the President in his usual third person address.[7]

The new president certainly wants that organisation on side, even if it is only to use it as a rapid attack dog for the US republic. Waterboarding, for instance, is said to make a return. Counter-terrorist efforts are to be beefed up. But the greatest question there is how that organisation reconciles itself with Trump's approach to the Kremlin.

The battle of the lobbies is looming in Trumpland. If there is one awful reality to play itself out here, lobbies, with their stifling tentacles, will be it. The idea of an intelligence lobby that has stepped out of the shadows to actively barrack for their own candidate should be a worrying sign of the times, the rank smell of a potential coup d'état in the wings.

Now in office, Trump is coming at this from behind, having to face a multiple number of factions who are keen to frustrate, if not demolish him. Street marchers call for him to

repealed; political pundits predict impeachment within months. The choice of the US electoral system, not being the choice of a good number within the intelligence community, makes the initial period of the Forty Fifth Presidency precarious indeed.

Notes

[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/05/opinion/campaign-stops/i-ran-the-cia-now-im-endorsing-hillary-clinton.html?_r=0

[2] https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/will-john-brennans-controversial-cia-modernization-survive-trump/2017/01/17/54e6cc1c-dcd5-11e6-ad42-f3375f271c9c_story.html?utm_term=.ca45f2e3358c

[3] https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/819164172781060096?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

[4] https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/820789938887294977?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

[5] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/01/17/the-director-of-the-cia-just-went-off-on-donald-trump-it-was-a-long-time-coming/?utm_term=.6b00079daa81

[6] <http://thehill.com/policy/national-security/intelligence/315503-former-cia-director-trump-should-be-ashamed-of-himself>

[7] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/01/21/trump-to-visit-cia-headquarters-after-sharply-criticizing-the-intelligence-community/?utm_term=.5179b306d979

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