

CIA director issues a warning to Congress

Bill Van Auken
4 August 2009

In an extraordinary column published Sunday in the *Washington Post*, the director of the CIA, Leon Panetta, issued a blunt warning to the US Congress to forego any investigation of the agency's operations under the Bush administration.

"I've become increasingly concerned that the focus on the past, especially in Congress, threatens to distract the CIA from its crucial core missions: intelligence collection, analysis and covert action," Panetta writes.

In other words, accounting for the crimes of the past must not be allowed to interfere with the crimes of the present and the future.

Panetta's essay is ostensibly aimed at reforging what he sees as the proper relationship between an elected Congress and US imperialism's powerful covert intelligence agency. Essentially, he argues that this relationship should be founded on "consensus"; i.e., Congress agreeing to the secret operations in which the CIA is engaged and keeping its mouth shut.

"We need broad agreement between the executive and legislative branches on what our intelligence organizations do and why," Panetta writes. Presumably, he is referring to the bipartisan support that has long existed in Washington for crimes ranging from the assassination of popular leaders like Patrice Lumumba to the overthrow of elected governments in Iran, Guatemala, Chile and elsewhere, to the waging of covert wars from Nicaragua to Angola that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands.

Panetta complains that the "consensus" has broken down as a result of policies carried out over the last eight years, citing in particular "the detention and interrogation of terrorists," by which he means the abduction, arbitrary imprisonment, "extraordinary rendition," torture and murder of thousands of individuals—most of them guilty of nothing—in the so-called "war on terrorism."

The breakdown of consensus, he adds, has led to "growing frustration and more frequent leaks of properly classified information."

What "properly classified information," he doesn't say. Among the leaks that have shaken the CIA in recent years were those dealing with its "black sites"—secret prisons scattered around the globe where people were subjected to torture—and the existence and destruction of videotapes showing CIA personnel engaged in torture.

The secrecy surrounding such practices was not a matter of the CIA having "properly classified information," but rather its cover-up of crimes, which is itself a criminal offense.

Claiming that the CIA has abandoned the illegal policies carried out under the Bush administration, Panetta stresses that "the CIA implements presidential decisions; we do not make them." He adds, "Yet my agency continues to pay a price for enduring disputes over policies that no longer exist."

Torture, assassination and arbitrary detention are violations of both US and international law for which no one responsible has paid any price. The argument made by Panetta boils down to the defense made infamous during the Nuremberg war crimes trials at the close of World War II: "We were only following orders."

Rejected then, it remains illegitimate today under international law, which also requires that governments prosecute citizens who are credibly charged with engaging in torture. President Obama—like his predecessor in the White House—has effectively repudiated the treaties on torture signed by Washington by publicly guaranteeing a blanket amnesty for the CIA.

But Panetta doesn't stop at those at the CIA who were "following orders." He makes it clear that impunity must be extended to those who gave the orders as well.

"The time has come for both Democrats and Republicans to take a deep breath and recognize the reality of what happened after Sept. 11, 2001," Panetta insists. "The question is not the sincerity or the patriotism of those who were dealing with the aftermath of Sept. 11. The country was frightened, and political leaders were trying to respond as best they could."

What nonsense! Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and others

were not patriotic leaders “trying to respond as best they could” on behalf of a “frightened country.” They headed a conspiratorial cabal in the White House that used the attacks as a pretext to launch wars of aggression long in preparation against Afghanistan and Iraq—wars aimed not at protecting the American people, but asserting US hegemony over the oil-rich regions of Central Asia and the Persian Gulf.

They deliberately fomented and exploited fear to secure acquiescence to a policy of militarist violence abroad and far-ranging attacks on democratic rights at home.

What role the CIA itself played in allowing and even facilitating these attacks—attributed to the agency’s former “asset” Osama bin Laden—is no doubt another area of the past from which Panetta would like to move on.

Panetta cites his trip to Capitol Hill in June to inform intelligence committees about a secret program—reportedly involving the formation of assassination squads—that had existed for seven years but had never been disclosed to Congress. The CIA director complains that “rather than providing an opportunity to start a new chapter in CIA-congressional relations, the meeting sparked a fresh round of recriminations about the past.”

The revelation reignited charges by the Democratic leadership that it had been lied to and misled by the CIA under the Bush administration. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a former top Democrat on the House intelligence panel, had claimed in May that she was never informed of the agency’s waterboarding of detainees. In response, Panetta issued a statement to CIA employees essentially calling the speaker a liar.

The dubious character of Pelosi’s claim notwithstanding, Panetta’s public rebuke to an elected official standing second in the line of succession to the White House is a telling demonstration of the role of the intelligence and military complex as a powerful and increasingly autonomous state within a state.

Panetta goes further in his column: “Intelligence can be a valuable weapon, but it is not one we should use on each other. As the president has said, this is not a time for retribution. Debates over who knew what when—or what happened seven years ago—miss a larger, more important point: We are a nation at war in a dangerous world ...”

There is a chilling quality to this assertion, couched in the “nation at war” rhetoric that was the stock-in-trade of Bush, Cheney and Co. Intelligence is a weapon that “we”—the CIA and Congress—should not “use on each other.” Is Panetta threatening Congress? The statement

can be taken as a warning to Pelosi and others that unless they back off from any investigation of the agency’s crimes, it has the means to retaliate.

There is every reason to expect the Democrats in Congress to comply, just as they have been complicit in carrying out two wars of aggression and the enactment of a raft of legislation setting up the framework for a police state.

Neither the Obama administration nor the Democratic-led Congress will defend democratic rights or carry out the essential task of holding accountable those responsible for aggressive war, torture and other crimes. On the contrary, they are continuing these heinous practices in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the prisons at Guantánamo, Bagram and elsewhere.

These tasks can be realized only through the independent political mobilization of the working class in struggle against both political parties controlled by the financial elite. Only such a movement of working people can lay bare the illegal actions of the CIA and other US spy agencies and bring to account those who ordered them, including through the criminal investigation and prosecution of Bush, Cheney and others complicit in the crimes of the last eight years.

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