

US intelligence chief claims right to assassinate Americans overseas

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US Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair said on Wednesday that government agencies have a policy of assassinating Americans overseas as required by the “war on terror.”

In testimony before the House intelligence committee, Blair said the assassinations would be justified if US citizens were “taking action that threatens Americans.” This is an extremely broad category, giving the US intelligence apparatus general authority to engage in what amount to extra-judicial executions.

Such killings are illegal under international law, but they have become standard procedure for the American military and intelligence agencies, under the euphemism of “targeted killings.” They are now common as part of the full-scale military occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in other countries targeted by the US, including Pakistan and Yemen.

The question of killing Americans has come up specifically in relation to the US-born Yemeni cleric, Anwar al-Awlaki, who has been linked by the US government to the suspect in the attempt to blow up Northwest Airlines Flight 253 on Christmas Day. On December 24, the US launched strikes on an Al Qaeda compound in Yemen, and it was initially thought that al-Awlaki may have been among those killed.

Al-Awlaki has not been charged with any crimes. CNN reported, however, “Privately many administration officials said he is one of the next American citizens abroad with whom the US intelligence community wants to deal.” CNN did not say who else was on the list of citizens to be “dealt with.”

The US follows “a set of defined policy and legal procedures that are very carefully observed,” Blair

claimed. He also said that the US intelligence agencies seek “specific permission”—presumably from the White House, though Blair was not explicit—to carry out actions that will involve killing US citizens.

Peter Hoekstra, the ranking Republican on the intelligence committee, said he was “surprised” that Blair had made the statement in open session. “So there is a framework and a policy...a clear path as to when this person may be engaging in free speech overseas and when he may have moved into recruitment or when he may have moved into actually coordinating and carrying out attacks against the United States?” he asked.

Blair responded by saying that he preferred to go into the details in “closed session,” but added, “We don’t target people for free speech.”

That the head of US intelligence had to assure the population that the government does not kill US citizens on the basis of their political views and opinions only underscores the far-reaching criminalization of the state.

The Obama administration is continuing, and in many cases deepening, the attack on democratic and constitutional rights implemented by Bush. During the Bush administration, the question of warrantless monitoring of communications involving US citizens provoked a storm of controversy. Now, the US government openly asserts the right to kill US citizens abroad without protest from either political party.

Blair’s comments were given amidst escalating warnings from US intelligence about imminent terrorist attacks. Blair said that an attempted attack in the US within the next three to six months was “certain,” echoing comments made by CIA Director Leon Panetta on Tuesday.

“We have been warning in the past several years that

al Qaeda itself and its associated affiliates and al Qaeda-inspired terrorists remain committed to striking the United States,” Blair said, “and in the past year we have some names that go behind these warnings.”

In the midst of these warnings, it is remarkable that not a single congressman questioned Blair or Panetta on reports that US intelligence agencies intervened to block the revocation of the visa of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the man who attempted to blow up Northwest Flight 253.

There has been a systematic blackout by the media and the political establishment of congressional testimony by State Department official Patrick Kennedy since the publication by the *Detroit News* of an article last week under the headline, “Terror Suspect Kept Visa to Avoid Tipping off Larger Investigation.”

The *News* reported, “Patrick F. Kennedy, an undersecretary for management at the State Department, said Abdulmutallab’s visa wasn’t taken away because intelligence officials asked his agency not to deny a visa to the suspected terrorist over concerns that a denial would’ve foiled a larger investigation into al-Qaida threats against the United States.”

The intelligence agency in question was the National Counter Terrorism Center, which operates under the direction of the Director of National Intelligence—Dennis Blair.

The warnings from these same intelligence agencies of an imminent attack have an ominous character. Under the Bush administration, the government regularly manipulated warnings and threat assessments for political reasons—to justify unpopular policies, influence elections, or distract attention from embarrassing revelations. These warnings generally had very little basis in reality.

At the same time, any successful terrorist attack—whether or not it is facilitated by US intelligence agencies—will be seized on as a pretext for a further escalation of war and attack on democratic rights.



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