US intelligence director forced to resign

Bill Van Auken
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Dennis Blair, the first US official to assert the Obama administration's authority to order the assassination of American citizens suspected of terrorism, was forced to resign Friday as director of national intelligence.

Blair's long-anticipated departure is a culmination of protracted internecine struggles within the US intelligence apparatus. These frictions, in part, pitted Blair against the politically connected director of the Central Intelligence Agency, former White House chief of staff Leon Panetta. They have intensified, under conditions in which the state conspiracies that underlay the launching of two US wars of aggression and sweeping attacks on democratic rights continue unabated under the Obama administration.

News reports on Blair's resignation gave a hint as to the intensity of these tensions. Obama asked for Blair's resignation in a phone call Thursday, according to the *Washington Post*. While the administration had apparently requested that he stay on until a replacement could be nominated, he refused.

Much of the media commentary has centered on the "failure" of US intelligence, under "Blair's watch," to prevent a series of highly publicized, but abortive, terrorist attacks over the past several months. These include the recent failed car-bombing in Times Square, and the so-called Christmas Day attempt to set off a bomb aboard a US passenger jet flying into Detroit.

It was the Christmas Day attempt that has been cited most as a catalyst for Blair's ouster, which came just days after the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence issued a report that was sharply critical of the intelligence agencies and cited 14 supposed failures in dealing with abundant warnings of the impending terrorist attack.

In particular, it criticized the National Counterterrorism Center, an agency that operates under the authority of the director of national intelligence (DNI) and is supposed to coordinate information that is compiled by different agencies in scores of separate databases.

Blair responded to the report with a statement acknowledging that "institutional and technological barriers remain that prevent seamless sharing of information."

The center, like the DNI post itself, was created based on recommendations from the September 11 Commission, amid the ubiquitous claims that the failure to uncover the 9/11 plot was a matter of failing to "connect the dots." This, in turn, was attributed to institutional rivalries between the country's intelligence agencies, including the CIA, the military-controlled National Security Agency and the FBI.

The evidence in the Christmas Day event, as in the 9/11 attacks themselves, however, strongly suggests that something far more sinister than "intelligence failures" was involved. The Nigerian student Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who was allowed to board the flight in Amsterdam, had been identified to the CIA by his own father, someone well known to the agency, who warned that he was working with Al Qaeda elements in Yemen and constituted a threat. Intercepts of Al Qaeda communications from Yemen nearly two months before the abortive attack included discussion of using a Nigerian named "Umar Farouk" for a pending operation. And later intercepts pointed to December 25 as the target date for an attack.

State Department Undersecretary Patrick F. Kennedy subsequently said during a Congressional hearing that Abdulmutallab's visa was not yanked because intelligence officials had warned that it could interfere with a wider ongoing intelligence operation.

The obvious question is whether, under conditions of a bitter struggle over policy involving the Obama administration and US spy agencies, elements within the intelligence apparatus wanted a highly publicized, albeit abortive, terrorist incident to unfold in order to further their own agenda.

What precise role Blair played in this incident is not clear. According to some reports, the White House sought to blame Blair for the "intelligence failures," while elements within the intelligence apparatus bristled at such criticism.

Blair further antagonized the White House by testifying before a congressional panel earlier this year that he had not been consulted on the decision to criminally charge Abdulmutallab. He further argued that a newly formed High-value Detainee Interrogation Group should have been used in questioning the suspect.

This was precisely the procedure used against the suspect in the attempted Times Square car bombing, Faisal Shahzad, who was held incommunicado for 15 days before being produced in a Manhattan federal court earlier this week.

Blair, a former four-star admiral in the US Navy, was tapped to serve as the DNI by Obama as the incoming president was vowing to shake up the US intelligence agencies and put an end to practices that had aroused anger and contempt for

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Washington around the world. These included torture, extraordinary rendition and the detention without charges or trials of supposed terrorist suspects at Guantánamo, Bagram and secret CIA "black sites" scattered around the world.

However, with barely two and a half months in office, the attempt to put a fresh face on the CIA by releasing the so-called torture memos, with which the Bush administration Justice Department provided a pseudo-legal justification for waterboarding and other torture methods, provoked a wave of criticism and recriminations from within the intelligence agency. Obama responded with a trip to CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, making what amounted to an apology and assuring the agency's personnel that he would protect those who organized and carried out torture and other criminal practices.

Having provoked the ire of the intelligence agency, the Obama White House dropped any plans for intelligence reforms.

The episode solidified the CIA's power within the administration, which was further bolstered by Obama's selection of John Brennan, an ex-CIA top official who was himself implicated in the torture policy, as his senior counterterrorism adviser.

The position of director of national intelligence has from the outset been somewhat of a fiction, with the DNI supposedly exercising overall control of 16 separate spy agencies, but having no control over their huge budgets and no real budget or significant staff of its own.

Blair's attempts to assert his authority were openly rebuffed and thwarted by the CIA leadership. This came to a head last May over his proposal to appoint his own representatives at US embassies abroad, effectively usurping the role of the so-called "station chiefs" installed by the CIA. Panetta, the CIA director, responded with a memo to agency employees telling them to ignore Blair's order, as the agency's own station chiefs would remain in charge.

The White House, which brought in Vice President Joe Biden to mediate the dispute, sided with Panetta, effectively curtailing any attempt by Blair to alter existing relations within the US intelligence apparatus.

Blair's ouster was met with statements of regret and criticism from the Republican right, which cast him as an apolitical professional against officials it has characterized as Democratic loyalists with no national security competence: Attorney General Eric Holder, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and Panetta himself.

Several Republican members of Congress referred to Blair as a scapegoat. "It must have been challenging to be forced on the sidelines by the attorney general but still catch all the blame for failings," Senator Kit Bond, a Missouri Republican and ranking Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee, told Fox News.

There is nothing to suggest that Blair had any agenda for curbing the criminal practices of the US intelligence agencies, but rather merely one of making them more efficient.

In April of last year, a memo that Blair issued to his staff surfaced in which he provided a tacit justification of torture, in much the same language used by former Vice President Dick Cheney. He told his staff members that "high value information came from interrogations in which those methods were used."

In testimony before the Senate intelligence panel in February of last year, Blair appeared to startle some lawmakers by asserting that the gravest national security threat posed to Washington was not terrorism, but the deepening crisis of world capitalism, which he described as the most severe in "decades if not centuries." He warned that with it came the threats of a resurgence of the "violent extremism" of the 1920s and 1930s and "regime-threatening instability."

And last February, Blair testified before a House committee that the US government had the power to assassinate US citizens in the "war on terror" based on the finding that they are "taking action that threatens Americans." Blair declined to be specific about who approved such findings and gave the orders for what amounts to extra-judicial executions, but the clear implication was that it would be the White House.

The full scope of the internal tensions that led to Blair's removal is not known. It is, however, part of deep-going conflicts within the US state apparatus under conditions in which the intelligence agencies, together with the military, continue to amass ever-greater power. The CIA is now conducting a not-so-secret war against the people of Pakistan, while openly assuming the power to carry out targeted assassinations of American citizens.

No matter how much the Obama administration has done to continue, and in many cases deepen, the policies of aggressive war and police-state measures initiated under the Bush White House, there are elements within this military-intelligence apparatus that want to go much further.

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