

The Brennan nomination: A government of torturers and assassins

Bill Van Auken
9 January 2013

“He has worked to embed our efforts in a strong legal framework,” President Barack Obama declared Monday during an appearance in the East Room of the White House. “He understands we are a nation of laws. In moments of debate and decision, he asks the tough question and he insists on high and rigorous standards.”

The president was describing his nominee as director of the Central Intelligence Agency, John Brennan, who currently serves as Obama’s homeland security and counterterrorism adviser. He also lauded Brennan’s “integrity” and “commitment to the values that define us as Americans.”

One would hardly guess from this high-flown rhetoric that Obama was describing Brennan’s role as the nation’s assassin-in-chief. He has demonstrated his “integrity” and commitment to values, law and standards by chairing the so-called “terror Tuesday” sessions at the White House, putting together “kill lists” for the president to approve, and overseeing remote-controlled murder by Predator drones.

The “strong legal framework” refers to his development of the so-called “disposition matrix,” a system for “codifying and streamlining” the extrajudicial executions that are carried out by means of drone missile strikes on a virtually daily basis. This framework, developed by a cabal of military and intelligence officials, has as much to do with a “nation of laws” as the decrees issued by Hitler during the Third Reich.

This is Obama’s second attempt to nominate Brennan, a 25-year CIA operative. Following his inauguration in 2009, the newly elected Democratic president found himself compelled to back off from installing Brennan as CIA chief in the face of a storm of protest from liberals and “lefts” in and around the Democratic Party.

Having served during the first term of the Bush administration as chief of staff to CIA Director George Tenet and director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Brennan was deeply implicated in both the execution and defense of the crimes carried out during that period, ranging from torture to extraordinary rendition and illegal domestic spying.

The contradiction between the nomination of Brennan, who personified continuity with the Bush administration’s “global war on terror,” and Obama’s 2008 campaign message of “hope and change” and his promise of a break with the odious policies of his predecessor was simply too stark.

Now, four years later, the Brennan nomination has aroused scant controversy within what passes for the liberal and “left” media and is expected to sail through the Senate confirmation process.

A representative reaction was that of the *New York Times*, which editorialized Tuesday on Obama’s nominations of Brennan to head the CIA and former Republican Senator Chuck Hagel to lead the Defense Department. The first half of the *Times* editorial was devoted to concern that Hagel’s “views on gay rights are in question,” based on a remark he made in 1998 on the nomination of James Hormel, heir to the meatpacking fortune, as a US ambassador. Brennan’s involvement in torture, drone strike assassinations and other crimes was relegated to the next to the last paragraph.

It would be hard to find a better illustration of the political priorities of what passes for liberalism in America today: a fixation on identity politics as it relates to the more privileged layers of the population and an indifference to democratic rights at home and the crimes of US militarism abroad.

Equally revealing was a column by Andrew Sullivan,

the former *New Republic* editor, who in 2009 had denounced the move to make Brennan CIA director. On Monday, he wrote for the *Daily Beast*, “I’m not as inclined to oppose him this time around, in part because torture has ended, and in part because he is increasingly one of the good guys on the drone program.”

“People change,” Sullivan added. Indeed, they do.

Invitations to White House dinners no doubt help speed such changes along. A whole layer of well-heeled establishment liberals has turned into an unabashed constituency for imperialism and its crimes, a process with deep social roots that has been accelerated under the Obama administration.

The resurrection of the Brennan nomination has been facilitated by the Obama administration’s protection of all those responsible for torture and other war crimes under the Bush administration. Under the perverse mantra of “look forward, not backward,” Obama and his Justice Department have quashed any prosecution of either the CIA torturers themselves or those from George W. Bush on down who oversaw their activities. They have likewise intervened in case after case to block lawsuits seeking redress or even information concerning these crimes.

The crimes of the Obama White House have eclipsed those carried out under Bush, and Brennan has been at the center of them. The drone warfare which he has directed has terrorized entire populations, principally in Pakistan, but increasingly in Yemen, Somalia and no doubt elsewhere. While Brennan made the preposterous claim in June 2011 that over the previous year not a single civilian had been killed in a drone strike, the Pakistani government has insisted that such victims number in the thousands of men, women and children.

Moreover, Brennan has been the leading advocate within the administration of Obama’s arrogation of the power to order the extra-judicial execution of American citizens, without charging them with any crime, much less proving charges in a court of law. This policy was implemented in the September 2011 drone missile assassination of New Mexico-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki and another American citizen in Yemen, followed two weeks later by the drone missile murder of Awlaki’s 16-year-old son.

In the aftermath of Obama’s 2012 reelection, various liberals and pseudo-lefts speculated that he would pursue a more “progressive” agenda in his second term.

“With re-election safely behind him, we hope Obama will be bolder in his second term,” wrote the *Nation* magazine last month. “He should diversify his inner circle of economic advisers and cabinet appointees to include more progressive voices.”

The Brennan nomination exposes the criminal political role played by those who promote such illusions. Even before his inauguration, it could not be clearer that Obama in his second term will pursue a political agenda dictated by America’s ruling financial oligarchy and its military and intelligence apparatus. Its axis will be savage austerity and attacks on working class living standards at home and an escalation of militarist interventionism and war crimes abroad.

The pursuit of these policies requires the ever more sweeping assumption of police state powers, as the ruling class prepares to confront social upheavals. The defense of basic democratic rights, jobs and social conditions requires the independent political mobilization of the working class and the preparation of a new revolutionary leadership for the historic struggles that are to come.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact