

Veteran of torture program appointed new deputy CIA director

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The Central Intelligence Agency announced February 2 that its new deputy director will be Gina Haspel, a 32-year CIA veteran who ran one of the first secret prisons where Al Qaeda suspects were subjected to torture in the period following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the US.

In an official statement, newly confirmed CIA Director Mike Pompeo hailed Haspel as a “devoted patriot” and “a proven leader with an uncanny ability to get things done.” The Trump administration highlighted the fact that Haspel is the first female deputy director of the spy agency.

Among the things Haspel is known for “getting done” is the torture of Abu Zubaydah and Abd el-Rahim al-Nashiri at a black site prison in Thailand in 2002. Zubaydah and al-Nashiri were kidnapped as part of Washington’s “extraordinary rendition” program in the months following the 9/11 attacks. Shipped to foreign countries, the detainees were then subjected to medieval tortures, including waterboarding. Zubaydah was subjected to that technique on 83 separate occasions in the space of one month, before the CIA torturers concluded that he had no information to provide.

Also on Haspel’s resume is the 2005 order to destroy the videotapes of the interrogation sessions at the Thai site, code-named “Cat’s Eye,” as well as at other secret prisons. The order was given by her boss at the time, Jose Rodriguez, the head of the CIA’s clandestine service. It was Haspel who carried it out.

The destruction of evidence followed well over a year of CIA stonewalling in the face of requests from the official 9/11 Commission, formed in 2003 supposedly to get to the bottom of the terror plot and the government’s response to it. The fact that the tapes had been destroyed did not surface until later. In 2008, the

commission co-chairs, Democrat Lee Hamilton and Republican Thomas Kean, felt obliged to call the CIA’s role “obstruction.”

During this time, Haspel was working under cover at the CIA, but her identity was well known in official circles. By 2013, Haspel was acting director of the clandestine service. Then-CIA Director John Brennan shifted her out of the position, however. The fact that Haspel was considered within top government circles to have been compromised by her torture record was a likely factor in that personnel move.

That has changed in the administration of Donald Trump. The new president, who has almost gleefully declared that “torture works,” appointed former Kansas Congressman Pompeo, another supporter of waterboarding, to head the CIA. At his Senate confirmation hearing, Pompeo verbally softened his position on “enhanced interrogation” and Trump has said he will “defer” to retired Gen. James P. Mattis, the new secretary of defense, who has publicly disavowed waterboarding and other torture techniques.

This could change at a moment’s notice. Trump’s nomination of Pompeo, followed by the selection of Haspel, are signals that torture remains very much under consideration. Also significant was an executive order prepared in recent days that looked toward the reopening of some black site prisons. That order that was amended after opposition from Congress and, apparently, some debate within the Trump cabinet.

The elevation of Haspel is one more illustration of the unprecedented character of the current administration in Washington. Its policies rest on a political foundation that has been built up over previous governments, but it is taking these policies to a qualitatively more reactionary and menacing level. George W. Bush, for instance, came close to an open defense of torture, but

never celebrated it as openly as Trump. In Obama's case, there was a public disavowal of torture combined with the insistence that the country had to "look forward, not backward," a euphemism for shielding the torturers and their Bush administration superiors from prosecution, based on the understanding that they might be needed again.

Leading Democrats have made a muted show of concern over the selection of Haspel for the CIA post. To the extent that there is anything genuine about their statements, it is concern for the image of American imperialism around the world and the damage to its interests caused by what they consider Trump's too-brazen behavior. This concern, however, did not stop California Democrat Dianne Feinstein, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee and former chair of the Intelligence Committee, or Charles Schumer, the new Senate minority leader, from joining with a dozen other Democratic senators in voting for Pompeo's confirmation to the top CIA post.

The Trump administration has introduced a number of testimonials to Ms. Haspel. Among those who have lauded her service and welcomed her appointment are James Clapper, the director of national intelligence under Obama, and Michael Morell, who was on two occasions the acting director of the CIA and was one of the most vitriolic critics of Trump and enthusiastic supporters of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election campaign.



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