

Late-night TV host Stephen Colbert shares jokes with former NSA, CIA chief Michael Hayden

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On March 7, the former director of the National Security Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency, Michael Hayden, someone implicated in illegal mass surveillance, the Bush administration's torture program, and the expansion of drone warfare, was a guest on CBS television's *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. What was he doing there?

For one thing, his appearance, unpleasantly, represented a certain meeting of minds.

Colbert, as many readers will know, has been an outspoken critic of Donald Trump, primarily from the right-wing standpoint of the campaign being waged by the bulk of the corporate media and the entire Democratic Party to paint Trump as a stooge of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Hayden's stature, among "left liberal" elements within the establishment such as Colbert, has risen in recent months because of his opposition to Trump's 2016 presidential bid and his continued criticisms of Trump since the new administration took office. These forces are more than willing to overlook Hayden's war crimes and crimes against American democracy because this spymaster and architect of US subversion and violence around the world considers Trump too "soft" on Russia.

Hayden was one of 50 former national security officials, all of whom served Republican presidents, to sign an open letter last August arguing that Trump was unqualified to be president and that, if elected, "he would be the most reckless president in American history."

On Thursday, he published a critical column in the *New York Times* under the headline "How Trump Politicizes Intelligence Gathering."

During his seven-minute slot on Colbert's program, aside from promoting his book, *Playing to the Edge*, actually published more than a year ago, Hayden addressed two issues raised by the *Late Show* host: Trump's recent allegations that his predecessor, Barack Obama, wiretapped him during the 2016 election campaign, and the new WikiLeaks revelations about massive CIA surveillance, hacking and cyberwarfare.

"On Saturday morning, at 6:35 in the morning the president tweeted that Barack Obama wiretapped him in Trump Tower. Is that possible?" began Colbert. "No," replied Hayden. "How is that not possible?" Colbert asked, noting that the US government had the power to wiretap, and "there are all these Russian rumors

about the Trump campaign. Why wouldn't the president do this?"

Hayden baldly asserted that "in the 1970's we took the authority to direct that action out of the hands of the president, and we put it in the hands of the federal court system." He claimed that "as director of NSA, I'd have to go to the judge, and I'd have to prove to a level of probable cause that the intended target of the surveillance was either the agent of a foreign power or was involved in some sort of criminal activity."

Of course, this is a lie. In the first place, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (or FISA Court) is a rubber stamp for the intelligence agencies' demands, and, second, they simply bypass the court at will when necessary, as the Edward Snowden revelations and the recent CIA leaks make evident.

After providing Hayden with a platform from which to defend the unconstitutional NSA spying programs, Colbert got in a few cracks about Trump and his tweeting, with the retired Air Force general chiming in.

Colbert then brought up the WikiLeaks exposures, again in a facetious and unserious fashion. "If WikiLeaks is to be believed ... the CIA is looking at me and listening to me through my TV," Colbert said. Hayden smiled and chuckled.

Colbert rejoined: "Is the CIA listening to me through my microwave oven and through my TV and through my cellphone? Are they doing that, sir?"

"No," Hayden answered.

"If they were, would you say yes?" the host went on. "Yes," said his guest.

"Is that a true answer?" Colbert continued. "Yes," Hayden said, laughing, before Colbert laughingly offered his only hint of criticism: "I don't believe you."

Then Hayden was once more given free rein, this time to peddle the justification of the US military-intelligence establishment for its efforts to spy on every human being on earth. He did not deny the existence of the CIA hacking and surveillance tools, but contended "there are some bad people in the world who have Samsung TVs, too," and, "I can tell you that these tools would not be used against an American."

Colbert did not challenge this obvious falsehood. Hayden went on, "But there are people out there that you want us to spy on. You want us to have the ability to actually turn on that listening device inside the TV, to learn that person's intentions. This is a

wonderful capability. You give the intelligence community \$53 billion a year. You gotta get something for your money.”

With the pair grinning, and the audience apparently mightily amused, the conversation ended.

Who is Michael Hayden?

Perhaps few figures today have taken part in so many imperialist crimes. George Packer observed in the *New Yorker* last year that Hayden, who retired from the Air Force as a four-star general, “spent just about his whole career as an intelligence officer—providing intelligence to B-52 pilots in Vietnam, serving as chief of intelligence for US forces in Europe during the Bosnian war, and then running the Air Intelligence Agency.” He also worked in intelligence in then-Stalinist Bulgaria, South Korea and Guam.

Hayden was director of the NSA from 1999 to 2005, during which time he oversaw the implementation of various domestic spying programs. In May 2006, for example, *USA Today* broke the story that the NSA had a “mass database of Americans’ phone calls.”

“The National Security Agency has been secretly collecting the phone call records of tens of millions of Americans, using data provided by AT&T, Verizon and BellSouth,” the newspaper reported.

In April 2005, Hayden became the first principal deputy director of national intelligence under the notorious John Negroponte. During his stint there, Hayden referred to those who believed that CIA torture of detainees had never generated valuable intelligence as “interrogation deniers.”

In May 2006, Bush appointed Hayden as CIA director. In that post, in the name of the “war on terror,” Hayden supervised CIA “black sites” and “enhanced interrogation,” in other words, torture, although supposedly some of the worst practices had come to an end by the start of his tenure.

At the CIA, he “lobbied hard,” as one media report indicated, for the expansion of drone strikes, including against houses or cars merely on the basis of “patterns” that matched the lifestyles of Al Qaeda and other groups’ members.

In Hayden’s book, as Packer notes, he describes contemplating “an order to subject a detainee named Muhammad Rahim al-Afghani to sleep deprivation and a liquid diet. Hayden writes, ‘I remember staring down at the page, pen in hand, hesitating to take that step.’ Needless to say, he signed. When it comes to detainee deaths, innocent men wrongfully held in brutal conditions and other abuses, Hayden barely glances over his shoulder: “There were occasional mistakes.””

During his final days at the CIA, in the first weeks of the Obama administration, Hayden strongly opposed the release of the Bush Justice Department torture memos. In 2014, he bitterly denounced the Senate Intelligence Committee report that shed light on some of the CIA’s more brutal and sadistic methods, including “rectal feedings,” threats to rape children and family members, interrogation by hypothermia, etc. The report also revealed that Hayden had lied to members of the US Congress and others about the effectiveness of the CIA torture program and how many detainees it held.

This is the individual who mugged and kidded around with

Colbert this week.

The mix of intelligence agency criminality and late-night “comedy” is revolting. Hayden already appeared last year on *The Daily Show* with Trevor Noah and *Real Time with Bill Maher*. The rapprochement of allegedly “edgy” and “anti-establishment” comics with figures like the former director of the NSA and CIA says far more about the former than the latter.

It is a fact that, particularly since the Democratic Party launched its charge—never substantiated—of Russian interference in the election in favor of Trump, the Democrats and their “liberal” media allies such as the *New York Times* have proclaimed the CIA to be the indispensable guardian of American democracy and denounced any criticisms of it as tantamount to treason.

Colbert, Maher and Jon Stewart, and one could throw in the name of filmmaker Michael Moore as well, earned a certain reputation for their barbed comments about the Bush administration. However, their opposition proved purely cosmetic—and ephemeral. They found Bush’s imbecilities something of an embarrassment. There were cultural and “lifestyle” objections. The comedians felt much more comfortable, it turned out, with Barack Obama’s “pivot” to identity politics issues, even as he bailed out Wall Street and prosecuted wars throughout the Middle East.

Now, Trump in power has once again brought them back to life as “critics,” but this time in a thoroughly reactionary, pro-war vein, as proponents and allies of the military and the intelligence agencies. Before an audience of more than 2 million people, Colbert on Tuesday introduced a reprehensible and sinister figure as a jovial spokesman for American democracy.

In April 2006, Colbert had his best day, when he skewered President George W. Bush, seated nearby, at the White House Correspondents’ Association dinner. He began, “By the way, before I get started, if anybody needs anything else at their tables, just speak slowly and clearly into your table numbers. Somebody from the NSA will be right over with a cocktail.”

Later, in his comedic persona as a right-wing buffoon, Colbert denounced the liberal media for “reporting on NSA wiretapping” and “secret prisons in Eastern Europe.”

At the time, Hayden, Colbert’s future partner in chat, had recently left his post running the NSA and was serving as the deputy director of national intelligence. Eleven years later, any “misunderstandings” have been ironed out.



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