

# CIA co-opts Harriet Tubman to boost its efforts to recruit spies and assassins

Genevieve Leigh  
4 October 2022

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) made headlines last week after agency director William J. Burns cut the ribbon on a new statue of Harriet Tubman outside CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

The statue of Tubman (c. 1822-1913), the great abolitionist and political activist of the American Civil War, now stands next to two others: Nathan Hale, an American spy executed by the British during the Revolutionary War, and William J. Donovan, considered the “founding father” of the CIA.

The unveiling of the statue is the focal point of a broader CIA campaign around Tubman’s legacy. A special tribute on the CIA website titled, “Honoring Harriet Tubman: A Symbol of Freedom and an Intelligence Pioneer,” attempts to rebrand Tubman as a 19th century version of a CIA spy. The piece is a carefully written, distorted history of Tubman’s life and the historical significance of her work.

The piece couches Tubman’s heroic work of rescuing slaves through the Underground Railroad in military garb, describing her as “leading clandestine operations” to “gather vital intelligence” as a “spy.”

A Twitter post by the CIA announcing the piece reads, “Harriet Tubman was not only a conductor of the Underground Railroad, but also a spy for the Union.”

One struggles to find the words to describe the level of absurdity surrounding the whole campaign. Commentary on the event reads like a skit showcasing the height of delusion and depravity in the ruling class.

“It was awesome,” CIA Museum Director Robert Byer told the *Washington Post* after the ribbon-cutting ceremony.

Byer went on to explain to NBC News that Tubman’s legacy “was an example of intelligence work, going behind enemy lines, using safe houses and signals intelligence to get people to freedom.”

“Tubman operated with ingenuity, stealth, courage and selflessness,” Byer said. “These are all traits we want our officers to embody.”

“At first blush,” the *Washington Post* writes, “Tubman, a civil rights activist who famously and repeatedly broke the law, might seem an unlikely inspiration for today’s foreign intelligence officers. But Byer said there was a lot of overlap between the ‘ethos’ of the CIA and Tubman’s.” Who do they think they are fooling?

Tubman was part of a whole generation of anti-slavery opponents such as Frederick Douglass, John Brown, Sojourner Truth, and Wendell Phillips who represented a profoundly egalitarian and democratic tradition.

When they supported the military struggle of the Union against the Confederacy, as Tubman did, not just in words but in deeds, they were fighting on side of that democratic tradition against the monster of slavocracy. Today, by contrast, the CIA defends countless reactionary, dictatorial regimes around the world, including some, like Saudi Arabia, where slavery is still practiced.

If one were to search for the modern-day equivalent of the oppressors against whom Tubman and her contemporaries fought, the plantation masters and their slave-catchers, those who today shackle, enslave and torture others, one would need look no further than the CIA itself.

The record of CIA torture and crimes against humanity is matched in modern history only by the Nazi Gestapo and the Stalinist GPU/KGB. The agency runs a worldwide network of criminality, deceit, and violence operating through hundreds of black sites in every corner of the globe, used to carry out the interests of American imperialism with the most inhumane and depraved means.

The Senate Intelligence Committee report on CIA torture, issued in 2014 as a heavily redacted document, cited the regular use of tactics such as waterboarding,

systematic beatings, forced chaining to a wall for up to 17 days, depriving prisoners of sleep for more than a week, threatening prisoners with death, “mock burials,” and hitherto unknown tortures such as “rectal feeding.”

One shudders to imagine what would be revealed in the unredacted report.

What are the real character traits of those able to carry out such extreme violence? If one were to ask Majid Khan, Chelsea Manning, or Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri what skills their torturers possessed, what would they say?

When former CIA director Gina Haspel was watching the torture of detainee Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, who was hooded and naked, at a US black site in Thailand in 2002, was she portraying the same Harriet Tubman-style selflessness that Byer “hopes all their officers embody”?

Of course, it is hardly necessary to argue that the guiding principles of equality and freedom that were the bedrock of Tubman’s life stand as the complete antithesis to the entire basis of the CIA, which has organized the overthrow of democratically elected governments from Indonesia to Iran to Ukraine to Guatemala, Chile, and most of Latin America.

In fact, the real motivation behind the CIA campaign is quite plainly stated by the agency itself.

“We need diversity in order to do our mission here,” Byer said. “If those slaves hadn’t trusted Harriet Tubman, they wouldn’t have given her information.” That is, the co-opting of Harriet Tubman is a part of a broader campaign by the CIA to attract a more diverse workforce to the agency on the basis of identity politics imperialism.

This identity-based campaign initially garnered attention in 2021 with the launching of the “Humans of CIA” series. The campaign amounted to a series of videos highlighting the agency’s commitment to “racial and gender diversity.”

The rebranding of Tubman is part-and-parcel of the same basic campaign. “One of the things that this agency has in place is the idea that our workforce cannot work on worldwide missions without looking like the United States, without looking like the world,” Janelle Neises, deputy director of the CIA’s museum, explained in an interview.

The campaign has caused the usual backlash among the right-wing elements. Mike Pompeo, for example, tweeted in response to the unveiling of the statue, “a woke military is a weak military.” On the other hand, there has been no public backlash thus far from outlets claiming to be left.

Their silence is a reflection of an extreme nervousness.

The seamless marriage of identity politics and US imperialism is a devastating exposure of the reactionary content of politics based on race, gender, and sexuality that almost all the so-called “left” organizations in the US have so ferociously promoted.

Identity politics and related ideologies such as intersectionality have become a fundamental part of the Democratic Party’s efforts to divide workers and enrich a thin layer of the middle class which falsely presents itself as “representative” of the broad masses.

The fact that these “left ideas” are now proving an essential tool of the bourgeoisie to maintain its class domination over the working class by keeping workers divided along racial and gender lines stands to expose all those identity politicians who have made careers out of denigrating class identity, promoting the Democratic Party, and supporting so-called “human rights” imperialism.

Moreover, the CIA is carrying out this campaign against the backdrop of open and intense discussion within the ruling class about the possibility of nuclear war. The United States and NATO are in a reckless pursuit of global geopolitical objectives for which they are prepared to sacrifice an untold number of working class lives and livelihoods, regardless of skin color, gender or sexual identity.

However, there is immense opposition to war within the working class and especially among working class youth. The reemergence of a wave of working class struggles throughout the US and around the world is generating a powerful bulwark of working class solidarity against the divisive and toxic politics of identity.

Over the last several months, an explosive opposition of rail workers has developed against the efforts of the unions and the Biden administration to force through a sellout agreement. There are also developing strike movements among health care workers, educators, service workers and other sections of the working class.

It will only be on the basis of a unified struggle by workers in defense of their social and democratic rights that war can be stopped, and all of the institutions of class exploitation dismantled.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**