

US MEDIA SHOCKED-SHOCKED!!-B Y PRESS SECRETARY'S GLOMAR ON DRONES

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Kudos to Chris Hayes for getting his now MSNBC colleague Robert Gibbs to admit that he was instructed, effectively, to give a Glomar – neither confirm nor deny – about the drone program.

“When I went through the process of becoming press secretary, one of the first things they told me was, ‘You’re not even to acknowledge the drone program. You’re not even to discuss that it exists,” said Gibbs, now an MSNBC contributor. That policy of secrecy, Gibbs said, made it difficult to deal with reporters asking about the program. Describing one such notable exchange in 2009 with Major Garrett, then of Fox News, Gibbs said, “I would get a question like that and literally I couldn’t tell you what Major asked, because once I figured out it was about the drone program, I realize I’m not supposed to talk about it.”

Gibbs added: “Here’s what’s inherently crazy about that proposition: you’re being asked a question based on reporting of a program that exists. So you’re the official government spokesperson acting as if the entire program...pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.”

[snip]

“I think you’ve seen recently the president discuss the need and desire to

be more forthcoming,” Gibbs said. “I have not talked to him about this, so I want to be careful, this is my opinion, but I think what the president has seen is, **our denial of the existence of the program when it’s obviously happening undermines people’s confidence overall in the decisions that their government makes.**” [my emphasis]

The press seems shocked by this. But the instruction to Gibbs to neither confirm nor deny is precisely parallel to the response the national security establishment has given to NYT and ACLU under FOIA: based on its claim that the program itself has never been officially confirmed (Gibbs, conveniently, is no longer on the payroll, so this exchange will be added to the long list of confirmations the program exists that get discounted as confirmation by judges), the government also refuses to confirm or deny that they have documents explaining things like how an American can be killed under the program.

Of course Gibbs has to neither confirm nor deny, because if he didn’t the government would have to share information about the program with mere citizens.

But the requirement that Gibbs issue the public equivalent of a Glomar – along with the press’ seeming surprise about this – is a testament that the government puts more stock in maintaining legal deniability in the face of crumbling actual deniability than in maintaining its democratic legitimacy.

That is, for whatever reason (and I suspect it’s a combination of legal concern about the actions actually committed and an unwillingness to reveal the real state of our relationships with the Pakistanis, Saudis, and Yemenis), the Administration is willing to have even its former press secretary suggest this treatment of widely acknowledged covert operations undermines the faith in government more generally.

Gibbs, for his part, seems to think the Administration is moving to make these things more transparent. Meanwhile, someone who looks suspiciously like Gibbs' former colleague at the National Security Council, Tommy Vietor, is bitching at the Intelligence Committees because they insist on being briefed on the drone program they're supposed to be overseeing.

"These guys don't even know what the hell they're asking for," the official said. "They think they can 'reverse-engineer' the [drone] program by asking for more memos, but these are not necessarily things that exist or are relevant... What they're asking for is to get more people read into very sensitive programs. That's not a small decision."

I'd say this Tommy Vietor lookalike probably has a better read on the Administration's interest in transparency than Gibbs at this point.