

ADVOCATE OF SECRET INFILTRATION, CASS SUNSTEIN, ON OBAMA'S "COMMITTEE TO MAKE US TRUST THE DRAGNET"

ABC [reports](#) that, along with former CIA Deputy Director Mike Morell, former Homeland Security Czar Richard Clarke, and former Obama special assistant for economic policy Peter Swire, the White House (or James Clapper – who knows at this point) has picked Cass Sunstein for its Review Committee on NSA programs.

Frankly, a lot of people are investing misplaced confidence that Richard Clarke will make this committee useful. While he's good on a lot of issues, he's as hawkish on cybersecurity as anyone else in this country. And as I keep pointing out, these programs are really about cybersecurity. Richard Clarke is not going to do a damned thing to rein in a program that increasingly serves to surveil US Internet data to protect against cyberthreats.

But Sunstein? Really?

As Glenn Greenwald (yeah – that Glenn; did they really think no one would raise this point?) [reported](#) back in 2010, Sunstein wrote a paper in 2008 advocating very creepy stealth measures against “conspiracy theories.”

In 2008, while at Harvard Law School, Sunstein co-wrote a truly pernicious paper proposing that the U.S. Government employ teams of covert agents and pseudo-“independent” advocates to “cognitively infiltrate” online groups and websites – as well as other activist groups – which advocate views that Sunstein deems “false conspiracy

theories” about the Government. This would be designed to increase citizens’ faith in government officials and undermine the credibility of conspiracists. The paper’s abstract can be read, and the full paper downloaded, [here](#).

Sunstein advocates that the Government’s stealth infiltration should be accomplished by sending covert agents into “chat rooms, online social networks, or even real-space groups.” He also proposes that the Government make secret payments to so-called “independent” credible voices to bolster the Government’s messaging (on the ground that those who don’t believe government sources will be more inclined to listen to those who appear independent while secretly acting on behalf of the Government). This program would target those advocating false “conspiracy theories,” which they define to mean: “an attempt to explain an event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who have also managed to conceal their role.”

And remember, a big mandate for this committee is not to review the programs to see if we can make them more privacy-protective, but simply to increase our trust in them. Which goes to the core of what Sunstein was talking about in his paper: using covert government propaganda to, in this case, better sell covert government spying.

Well, if Obama and Clapper’s rollout hadn’t already discredited this committee, Sunstein’s selection sure does.

Update: Adding some quotes from Sunstein’s [paper](#).

The importance of undermining conspiracy theories is especially important with terrorism.

Our main though far from exclusive focus – our running example – involves conspiracy theories relating to terrorism, especially theories that arise from and post-date the 9/11 attacks. These theories exist within the United States and, even more virulently, in foreign countries, especially Muslim countries. The existence of both domestic and foreign conspiracy theories, we suggest, is no trivial matter, posing real risks to the government’s antiterrorism policies, whatever the latter may be. Terrorism-related theories are thus a crucial testing ground for the significance, causes, and policy implications of widespread conspiracy theorizing.

True conspiracy theories shouldn’t be undermined.

Of course some conspiracy theories, under our definition, have turned out to be true. The Watergate hotel room used by Democratic National Committee was, in fact, bugged by Republican officials, operating at the behest of the White House. In the 1950s, the Central Intelligence Agency did, in fact, administer LSD and related drugs under Project MKULTRA, in an effort to investigate the possibility of “mind control.” Operation Northwoods, a rumored plan by the Department of Defense to simulate acts of terrorism and to blame them on Cuba, really was proposed by high-level officials (though the plan never went into effect).¹³ In 1947, space aliens did, in fact, land in Roswell, New Mexico, and the government covered it all up. (Well, maybe not.) Our focus throughout is on false conspiracy theories, not true ones. Our ultimate goal is to explore how public officials might undermine such

theories, and as a general rule, true
accounts should not be undermined. [my
emphasis]