

INTELLIGENCE OVERSIGHT AND PARTISANSHIP

David Ignatius picks up on a point I raised last week. We need to have better oversight of our intelligence activities.

Reading the newspapers over the past week, you would have to conclude that this oversight system is broken. It was intended to set clear limits for intelligence activities and then provide bipartisan political support for the operatives who do the dirty work. Instead, the process has allowed practices that are later viewed as abuses – and then, once the news leaks, it has encouraged a feeding frenzy of recrimination against the intelligence agencies.

And then he goes on to identify one of the biggest problems with our intelligence committees—partisanship.

The oversight process has broken down in a deeper way: The intelligence committees have become politicized. Members and staffers encourage political vendettas against intelligence officers they don't like, as happened when Goss brought his congressional aides with him to the CIA. The new National Intelligence Estimate on Iran has become a political football; so has negotiation over legal rules on intercepting foreign communications, one of the nation's most sensitive activities. The bickering has turned the intelligence world into a nonstop political circus, to the point that foreign governments have become increasingly wary of sharing secrets.

Now, perhaps there is some partisanship regarding the FISA debate that I don't know about. That's certainly the impression I got from Jane Harman's words in this video (I originally figured it was a stab at people like me, who consider accountability a non-partisan issue, and who object to her constant search ~~to~~ get rolled to forge a bipartisan compromise on telecommunication immunity). But if anything, the FISA **votes** have been characterized thus far as very bipartisan, with the Blue Dogs making a majority with the Republicans. Mike McConnell's last minute abandonment of the Democratic bill? That's another thing, but not something we can blame the committee for.

But the other evil partisanship Ignatius mentions—Goss' political vendettas, the attack on the Iran NIE's conclusion—are Republican fights. Largely, Cheney's fights.

I'm going to come back to this after I got to a meeting and do some Christmas shopping. But what's really at issue here is that the Republican Party has become the party of propaganda. And when people question or expose their propaganda, it becomes a fighting issue.

I do think we're entering a real discussion about Intelligence Oversight. But if one of the players is intent on creating propaganda, how is that discussion going to play out?