THE CIA LOSES CONTROL OF THE NARRATIVE

As Aeon points out, the CIA's spokesperson, George Little, is pissy about the coverage the WaPo gave to the latest partial declassification of detainee CSRTs.

> The June 16 news story "CIA Mistaken on 'High-Value' Detainee, Document Shows" suggests that Abu Zubaida was an unimportant terrorist figure before his capture in 2002. That is wrong. Mr. Zubaida was a major terrorist facilitator with extensive knowledge of al-Qaeda. During questioning, Mr. Zubaida provided valuable information, including a detailed road map to al-Qaeda operatives that greatly expanded our understanding of the terrorist group and helped take other terrorists off the streets. Had your reporters asked, we would have made those points.
>
> GEORGE LITTLE
>
> Spokesman
>
> Central Intelligence Agency

Thing is, it is George Little, and not Peter Finn and Julie Tate, who get it wrong—Little is mischaracterizing the WaPo story as a way to make his dubious claims about Abu Zubaydah. Here's what they wrote about Zubaydah.

> An al-Qaeda associate captured by the CIA and subjected to harsh interrogation techniques said his jailers later told him they had mistakenly thought he was the No. 3 man in the organization's hierarchy and a partner of Osama bin Laden, according to newly released excerpts from a 2007 hearing.
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> "They told me, 'Sorry, we discover that you are not Number 3, not a partner, not

> even a fighter,’ " said Abu Zubaida, speaking in broken English, according to the new transcript of a Combatant Status Review Tribunal held at the U.S. military prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.
>
> President George W. Bush described Abu Zubaida in 2002 as "al-Qaeda’s chief of operations." Intelligence, military and law enforcement sources told The Washington Post this year that officials later concluded he was a Pakistan-based "fixer" for radical Islamist ideologues, but not a formal member of al-Qaeda, much less one of its leaders.

They in no way suggested Zubaydah was unimportant or important. They reported he was a "fixer," and not a member of al Qaeda, which is precisely what he was. But Little invents claims made by the WaPo, so he can make grand claims about Zubaydah’s importance and intelligence value.

And there are two other weird aspects to Little’s strawman complaint. First look at whom the WaPo sources their own description of Zubaydah to: "intelligence, military and law enforcement sources." While "law enforcement sources" probably means FBI, intelligence sources may well mean folks at the CIA.

Finally, note that the WaPo did call the CIA for this article; he refuted ACLU attorney Ben Wizner’s claim that the CIA is hiding the CSRTs to shield the CIA from legal accountability.

> George Little, a CIA spokesman, said, "The CIA plainly has a very different take on its past interrogation practices – what they were and what they weren’t – and on the need to protect properly classified national security information."

(Though that appears to be a scripted statement that every CIA spokesperson was giving that

day.)

The question is, why would Little go to the trouble of correcting an error that was not one—in the letters to the editor section that only sharp-eyed readers like Aeon will see?

I've got two theories—though they're nothing but theories.

The first is that CIA anticipates it'll have to make the argument about whether or not CIA oversold Abu Zubaydah's position when they appealed for the right to torture. Since the "approval" granted by the Bybee Two memo rides on whether or not Abu Zubaydah was a high level operative, I can imagine that CIA would invest some (futile) energy in trying to pitch that story.

The second is that they're trying to undercut obvious theories—such as they lied about Abu Zubaydah's importance—that might make the FOIA battles upcoming in the next few weeks harder to win (or, alternately, the contempt charge from Judge Hellerstein).

Whatever it is, George Little's making a desperate effort to take out a few windmills before the real battle begins. And he's not doing a very credible job of even that.