

ON PDB DAY, A NEW DIRECTION AGAINST TERRORISM? JOHN BRENNAN'S COMING OUT PARTY?

Eight years ago, our President was on vacation, ignoring a Presidential Daily Brief that warned, "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in US." The brush on a pig farm in Texas, you see, was far more important.

And here we are now, six whole days in to August, and Obama's just got one week planned on Martha's Vineyard. How will the brush get cleared? How will the PDBs get ignored?

Obama has chosen today, PDB day, for John Brennan's coming out party, where Brennan will present Obama's new direction in counterterrorism. (Spencer will be liveblogging from the talk at the Windy).

There are parts of today's speech that are welcome. This is a reiteration of Obama's March renunciation of the War on Terror.

"This is not a 'war on terror.' . . . We cannot let the terror prism guide how we're going to interact and be involved in different parts of the world."

It's an embrace of soft power—a real engagement with the rest of the world. (Mind you, Bush tried it, but sent Karen Hughes to do the job.)

Washington must couple the military strikes that have depleted al-Qaeda's middle ranks with more sustained use of economic, diplomatic and cultural levers to diminish Islamist radicalization, he said, exercising "soft power" in ways that President George W. Bush came to embrace but had trouble carrying out.

But it also seems to represent the ascendancy of John Brennan, Obama's holdover from Bush's War on Terror team.

"His portfolio is growing, not shrinking," said Mark Lippert, a longtime Obama foreign policy aide and now chief of staff for the National Security Council, which is run by Brennan's boss, national security adviser James L. Jones. Brennan's role spans terrorism, cybersecurity, swine flu and some intelligence matters. "He has the president's trust. . . . Folks from all parts of the policy and intelligence community respect him," Lippert said.

I'm sure John Brennan is very knowledgeable and all. But he was also, apparently, intimately involved in the illegal activities of the Bush Administration, particularly Bush's domestic surveillance program.

So soft power is all well and good—provided we make a more competent attempt at it than Karen Hughes was able to muster. But will it move beyond the abuse of power Brennan was involved in under Bush?

Spencer has an appropriately skeptical look at this at the Windy:

... it's on Brennan to explain how this approach is more than saying, *No, no, we mean it this time* ... Is there an ideological component? Or does that implicitly overestimate the intellectual force that al-Qaeda possesses and counterproductively links al-Qaeda to a mainstream of Islamic thought? How does Brennan link Afghanistan, where the mission appears to be moving to something beyond counterterrorism, to this effort? Are these changes in policy or changes in branding?

And: how do the Republicans react? If

the Obama administration is doing anything, it's slowly killing the idea of a war on terrorism, which became almost a culture-war issue during the Bush era. "You cannot win a war when you don't believe you're fighting one," President George W. Bush **hector**ed in the days before the 2004 election.

Maybe it'll draw Cheney out of his cave to attack Obama—we haven't had a Darth Cheney sighting in a while.