

MARC THIESSEN, YOU ARE MY PIÑATA

✘ Normally, Marc Thiessen's torture apologies aren't worth my time. But seeing as how I didn't whack any piñatas on Cinco de Mayo, why not Thiessen's latest, in which he claims those who deny CIA interrogations played a part in nabbing bin Laden are the latest birthers?

Note the formulation, though: Thiessen's not talking about torture. He's talking about CIA interrogations generally, even while he links to a Sully post that in turn links to me (thanks Sully!). Sully was explicitly talking about torture, not interrogations generally, and I was talking specifically about waterboarding, and from that Thiessen concludes we deny CIA interrogations had any role in nabbing OBL.

What's the matter, Marc? Is your shifting of the debate indication you know you've lost the torture debate?

And boy does he lose that debate. Thiessen spends much of his column talking about people whose interrogations led to other plots, some of them totally debunked even within the documents Thiessen quotes. About the only piece he really connects to OBL is this interpretation of the intelligence Abu Faraj al-Libi contributed.

Take, for example, the file on Abu Faraj al-Libi – one of several CIA detainees who helped lead the agency to bin Laden's courier. The document describes Abu Faraj as the “communications gateway” to bin Laden who once in custody “reported on al-Qai'das methods for choosing and employing couriers, as well as preferred communications means.” Based on intelligence obtained from Abu Faraj and other CIA detainees, it states that “in July 2003, [Abu Faraj] received a letter from UBL's designated courier” (to whom he referred by a false name,

Maulawi Abd al-Khaliq Jan) in which “UBL stated [Abu Faraj] would be the official messenger between UBL and others in Pakistan.” The file also notes a vital piece of intelligence: To better carry out his new duties “in mid-2003, [Abu Faraj] moved his family to Abbottabad” – the city where bin Laden eventually met his end – “and worked between Abbottabad and Peshawar.” And the file reveals that “in mid-April 2005, [Abu Faraj] began arranging for a store front to be used as a meeting place and drop point for messages he wanted to exchange” with bin Laden’s courier and was captured while waiting to meet him.

So to summarize Thiessen’s spin of how al-Libi helped nab OBL:

- Al-Libi told the CIA that at a time when he was a key messenger for OBL, he had been in Abottabad
- Al-Libi told the CIA how important couriers were
- Al-Libi managed to hide the name of the all-important courier through whom we eventually found OBL, even under torture

Okay, Marc, so what did the CIA do with that intelligence? As Jose Rodriguez (who was head of Clandestine Services at the time) helpfully explained, they concluded from al-Libi’s interrogation that OBL was just a figurehead.

Al-Libbi told interrogators that the courier would carry messages from bin Laden to the outside world only every two months or so. “I realized that bin Laden was not really running his organization. You can’t run an

organization and have a courier who makes the rounds every two months,” Rodriguez says. “So I became convinced then that this was a person who was just a figurehead and was not calling the shots, the tactical shots, of the organization. So that was significant.”

And later that same year, the CIA shut down its dedicated hunt for OBL.

The Central Intelligence Agency has closed a unit that for a decade had the mission of hunting Osama bin Laden and his top lieutenants, intelligence officials confirmed Monday.

The unit, known as Alec Station, was disbanded late last year and its analysts reassigned within the C.I.A. Counterterrorist Center, the officials said.

The decision is a milestone for the agency, which formed the unit before Osama bin Laden became a household name and bolstered its ranks after the Sept. 11 attacks, when President Bush pledged to bring Mr. bin Laden to justice “dead or alive.”

The realignment reflects a view that Al Qaeda is no longer as hierarchical as it once was, intelligence officials said, and a growing concern about Qaeda-inspired groups that have begun carrying out attacks independent of Mr. bin Laden and his top deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

It wasn't until the intelligence community got the courier's real identity, and with it traced him back to Abbottabad—neither of which (according to reports thus far) came from al-Libi—that the intelligence community managed to track the courier in Abbottabad and in turn to OBL.

Now, as even the little bit I wrote that was quoted in Sully's post made clear (so Thiessen presumably read it), the point I'm making is not that CIA interrogations didn't yield information and—just as importantly—unbelievable denials—that ultimately helped lead to OBL. Rather, that either torture didn't do as promised (that is, ensure we got all the important information that might lead to OBL's location quickly) or the torturers were unable to understand the intelligence they were getting and so the intelligence was not used for years after we got it. Here's what Sully quoted from me.

We can conclude that either KSM shielded the courier's identity entirely until close to 2007, or he told his interrogators that there was a courier who might be protecting bin Laden early in his detention but they were never able to force him to give the courier's true name or his location, at least not until three or four years after the waterboarding of KSM ended. That's either a sign of the rank incompetence of KSM's interrogators (that is, that they missed the significance of a courier protecting OBL), or a sign he was able to withstand whatever treatment they used with him.

And Thiessen's own argument backs that up! According to his own argument, al-Libi gave us two key pieces of information, lied about another, and ... the CIA responded by deprioritizing their hunt.

This, apparently, is Thiessen's idea of a success!

And so, while those of us who note how torture stalled the hunt for OBL and didn't deliver as promised note that fact, Thiessen sits at the WaPo proclaiming misunderstood leads and detainee lies a sign of success.

Alas, thwacking Thiessen's nonsense won't do a damn bit of good. Like torture, I guess, piñata thwacking never seems to work with dead-enders like Thiessen.

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