

YOUR OBLIGATORY FRAN FRAGOS TOWNSEND LEAK

Remember how the detail that UndieBomb 2.0 involved a Saudi infiltrator got out? John Brennan had a private teleconference with Richard Clarke and Fran Fragos Townsend and implied as much, which led to Clarke reporting it (and not long after, ABC confirming it with foreign sources).

At about 5:45 p.m. EDT on Monday, May 7, just before the evening newscasts, John Brennan, President Barack Obama's top White House adviser on counter-terrorism, held a small, private teleconference to brief former counter-terrorism advisers who have become frequent commentators on TV news shows.

According to five people familiar with the call, Brennan stressed that the plot was never a threat to the U.S. public or air safety because Washington had "inside control" over it.

Brennan's comment appears unintentionally to have helped lead to disclosure of the secret at the heart of a joint U.S.-British-Saudi undercover counter-terrorism operation.

A few minutes after Brennan's teleconference, on ABC's World News Tonight, Richard Clarke, former chief of counter-terrorism in the Clinton White House and a participant on the Brennan call, said the underwear bomb plot "never came close because they had insider information, insider control."

Now, National Security Council Spokesperson Tommy Vietor, who aggressively but rather unconvincingly tried to claim that the

Administration had never intended to publicly announce UndieBomb 2.0, is claiming that the Administration is obligated to hold such teleconferences because the Administration is obligated to be “transparent” about potential threats.

The Yemen plot had many intelligence and national security officials flummoxed and angered by its public airing. Despite that, a senior administration official then briefed network counterterrorism analysts, including CNN’s Frances Townsend, about parts of the operation.

But such briefings are an “obligation” for the administration once a story like the Yemen plot is publicized, insisted National Security Council spokesman Tommy Vietor.

“The reason that we brief former counterterrorism officials is because they are extremely conscientious about working with us about what can and cannot be said or disclosed,” Vietor told Security Clearance. “They understand that there is an obligation for the U.S. to be transparent with American people about potential threats but will work with us to protect operational equities because they’ve walked in our shoes.”

This is the Administration that appears to have just fired a guy for revealing that the bankster threat is growing while the terrorist threat is diminishing, claiming they had to hold a teleconference with TV commentators just before prime time to make sure Americans regarded a Saudi-managed plot as a real threat.

Vietor’s in trouble. Presumably on his advice, the White House was prepping a big roll out of UndieBomb 2.0 the day after this call with Townsend and Clarke. Clearly, by going ahead

with the teleconference, he was trying to get maximum spin value out of the plot, after the AP had broken it. Indeed, the detail that led Clarke to learn the “plot” was really a sting—that we (or our buddies the Saudis) were in control the whole time—is precisely the same spin that Brennan’s sanctioned leaks have pushed in the Kill List and StuxNet stories.

But for a variety of reasons, it has become politically costly to admit the White House had planned to spin this. And so, Tommy Vietor keeps trying to tell new stories, hoping one will hold together.

Update: Three GOPers on SSCI wrote an op-ed implicitly condemning John Brennan’s revelations to Richard Clarke. The op-ed itself was mostly political grand-standing (and frankly, I’m not that bugged by GOPers attacking John “The Sieve” Brennan). But it elicited this really weird response from Wells Bennett over at Lawfare.

First, Bennett either doesn’t know (and didn’t read through the links) or doesn’t care that there were two parts to this story: the report that the CIA had thwarted a “plot” (reported by the AP), and the ABC-reported detail that the “plot” was actually a sting run by the Saudis with one of their AQAP infiltrators. The GOPers are—probably rightly—focusing on the leak that exposed sources and methods, that is, John Brennan’s (intentional or inadvertent).

Furthermore, Bennett either doesn’t know or doesn’t care that the AP’s story—which is far more consistent than Tommy Vietor’s story, which has now changed 4 times—is that the White House was preparing a big announcement about the plot the morning after the AP broke the story. If the AP is telling the truth, the only thing the AP is guilty of is preempting the White House’s big announcement.

Most of all, though, I want to point to Well’s language. According to him the CIA and the Saudis (who he doesn’t name) disrupted “a planned airline bombing” (he takes this language

from the Senators). Wells goes on to refer to a "thwarted attack." This, in spite of the fact that even the AP's reporting made it clear the "terrorist" (who turned out to be a Saudi asset) had never bought plane tickets, and once it became clear the "bomber" was a Saudi asset, it became clear the plot was a completed sting, not a thwarted attack.

Think of it this way. There were two conflicting plots going on. Mohammed bin Nayef's plot to infiltrate AQAP, collect intelligence on its latest structure, its capabilities, and its plans. That plot was—as far as we know—successful, up to a point. Then there is AQAP bombmaker Ibrahim al-Asiri's apparently still-active plan to attack US-bound planes. That plan—to the extent it existed before Nayef's plot—still exists, presumably waiting for the next western passport holder to survive AQAP's vetting. And one possible reason that plan still exists in the same form it existed in before Nayef's plot is because Nayef's plot did not succeed in what should have been one of its most important objectives, removing the "plan," such as it existed, by removing Asiri. And while we'll likely never know why that part of Nayef's plot didn't succeed, one possible reason is not because the AP reported that the CIA successfully "thwarted a plot," but because ABC revealed that Asiri's bomber was only ever a Saudi asset.

There's a real sloppiness to referring to this as a "thwarted plot," when such plot was Nayef's, not Asiri's. All the more so when arguing about which leaks proved detrimental to getting the guy who actually did and presumably still does have plans to bomb planes.