

BIPARTISAN AGREEMENT: GARBAGE INTO INTEL OVERSIGHT, GARBAGE OUT

House Intelligence Chair Mike Rogers made headlines on Monday by responding to a last ditch Dennis Kucinich call for more review of drone strikes by claiming that public reports on civilian casualties are “wildly wrong.”

“I think that you would be shocked and stunned how wrong those public reports are about civilian casualties,” Rogers said on the House floor.

“Those reports are wrong. They are not just wrong, they are wildly wrong. And I do believe that people use those reports for their own political purposes outside of the country to try to put pressure on the United States,” Rogers said.

And because House Intel Ranking Member Dutch Ruppersberger joined Rogers’ claims, some have taken this as magic bipartisan proof that the many indices that have done independent reviews of intelligence community claims about civilian drone casualties are wrong.

The ranking Democrat on the Intelligence Committee, Rep. Dutch Ruppersberger (D-Md.), said he agreed with Rogers’s assessment, but also did not reveal anything more specific.

“Unfortunately, there are some casualties, very minor,” he said. “What you read in the media is usually not what the facts are.”

I have already noted what happens when Gang of Four members who purportedly serve as the foundation of our oversight over the

intelligence community turn into talking heads defending it.

Ruppersberger's inconsistency on this point reminded me that after the super secret drone killing of some American citizens last year, the Gang of Four all weighed in to assure Americans that Anwar al-Awlaki's death was "legitimate" because there had been "a process." The Gang's loquacity contrasted sharply with the Administration's silence on the very same issue, one reiterated since in the Administration's Glomar claims about topics the Gang of Four feels welcome to discuss. That contrast is all the more troubling given that Ruppersberger admitted that the Gang of Four does not know who is on the Kill List (and therefore didn't really know whether the killing of Samir Khan was "legitimate").

It's all very neat. Not only does the Gang of Four enjoy immunity from prosecution under the Speech or Debate Clause. But they were—and presumably are—serving as journalistic sources on topics about which they aren't (though legally should be) fully informed.

Last week Julian Sanchez and Mike Masnick rehashed an earlier version of this, when the Bush Administration armed the Intelligence Committees with talking points that would reinforce their lies that the Terrorist Surveillance Program constituted the entirety of the illegal wiretap program.

Note what that does to the whole question of "legitimacy." The Gang of Four only knows what Administration and agency officials tell them. Yet, even in spite of potential and real limits to their knowledge of a program (and a history of deliberately misleading briefings on such topics), they will

weigh in and declare something
“legitimate.”

But this case is all the more interesting because Kucinich was specifically pushing his colleagues—these overseers—to question their knowledge on this front.

Look at the consequences of civilian casualties ... raise questions about the information that’s being given to you,” Kucinich said.

That is, Kucinich was raising a process question—one that goes to the heart of the cognitive problem intelligence overseers have, which is that they rely exclusively on those they are purportedly overseeing for the knowledge they use to exercise that oversight.

And rather than telling us what the real tally was, or even explaining how he knew his knowledge was better than that of people who have sent independent journalists to double check tallies, Rogers simply insisted that he knows best.

Based, by all appearances, solely on the very narrow information those he oversees choose to give him.