

HOW CAN WE SAY JOHN BRENNAN “KEPT US SAFE”?

I was struck when I read this line in Dexter Filkin’s article on John Brennan and drones:

None of the above is intended as an attack on Brennan, who has spent the past four years as President Obama’s counterterrorism advisor. He has a hard job. He is almost always forced to act on the basis of incomplete information. His job is to keep Americans safe, and he’s done that.

How are we supposed to measure Brennan’s success in the White House?

His title, after all, is not just “Counterterrorism Advisor.” It is “Deputy National Security Advisor for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism.” Homeland Security and Counterterrorism.

As Counterterrorism Advisory Brennan deserves credit, I guess, as terrorism has declined from 2009 levels (2009 was a spike year). Though it’s unclear how much of that is organic, and how much a result of Brennan’s efforts. In any case, I’m certainly willing to give him credit on that front.

But say his Homeland Security mandate includes cyberdefense? If that’s true – and it was for Richard Clarke when he was in that job – then Brennan has most assuredly not kept us safe. We’re getting hacked more than ever and we have yet to implement a comprehensive program that will keep critical infrastructure owned by corporations adequately defended.

Domestic terrorism is sort of included in Homeland Security. Indeed, Brennan has been involved in responses to mass shootings of both the domestic terrorist and non-terrorist

varieties. If that's part of Brennan's mandate, than isn't the spiraling rate of mass gun shootings proof he has failed? How can Filkins say Brennan "kept us safe" after Newtown?

And then there are things that should be included under any Homeland Security mandate but aren't. Chief among them would be, at the very least, increasing resilience to extreme weather events, but preferably even efforts to minimize the risk of climate change. Hurricane response is included, and there are still people in NYC who lack heat from Hurricane Sandy. Drought badly damaged the navigability of the Mississippi this year; does our failure to resolve that problem count?

Infrastructure safety is another; some of the very same corporations that refuse to implement cybersecurity defenses have had major catastrophes caused simply by neglect (which suggests the push to get them to shore up only their cybersecurity defenses is a mistaken approach). How do we measure that?

Honestly, I'm as critical of Brennan as anyone, and I'm not sure it's fair to hold him accountable for all the Homeland Security lapses on his watch. After all (as this Congressional Research Service paper makes clear), we don't have a solid definition of what's included in Homeland Security. So until we define it clearly, no one can be held accountable to that fuzzy definition.

That said, we ought to, at least, be cognizant of the definitions those executing the mission use. This is actually even relevant assuming (as is almost certain) that Brennan is confirmed; there has been debate, after all, whether or not CIA should be collecting intelligence on climate change. John Brennan prioritized his own work at the White House, and he appears not to have prioritized keeping first graders and Sikhs in their temple safe from crazy gunmen.

The point is, we as a country need to get better about defining what security for the "homeland"

means, particularly because it is intended to include non-military defense. We need to shift our resources and emphasis accordingly based on what the greatest threats are. The fact that we don't even know how Brennan defined that part of his job – and whether he was successful or not – tells us we've lost the big picture on our security.