

THE MORAL RECTITUDE TORTURE COVER-UP PROMOTION CZAR

Oh hi! Are you folks still here? Missed you!

First off, thanks to bmaz and Jim and Rayne for holding down the fort while Mr EW, McCaffrey the MilleniaLab, and I explored Kentucky. There are many wonderful aspects of the state: the sandstone arches, the ham, and I think we're even finally beginning to get this Bourbon thing!

I'll be catching up for a few days, probably commenting on things that broke while I'm away. Such as this news, that John Brennan is showing his leadership at CIA by having three former CIA people weigh in on whether he should retain the woman who destroyed the torture tapes as the head of the clandestine service (she's the acting head now, Brennan is considering making her appointment permanent; Mark Mazzetti has more details on her career here).

To help navigate the sensitive decision on the clandestine service chief, Brennan has taken the unusual step of assembling a group of three former CIA officials to evaluate the candidates. Brennan announced the move in a previously undisclosed notice sent to CIA employees last week, officials said.

[snip]

"Given the importance of the position of the director of the National Clandestine Service, Director Brennan has asked a few highly respected former senior agency officers to review the candidates he's considering for the job," said Preston Golson, a CIA spokesman.

The group's members were identified as former senior officials John McLaughlin,

Stephen Kappes and Mary Margaret Graham.

Note that at least two of these three were deeply implicated in the torture program, with McLaughlin involved in decisions and briefing of the program itself (and also vouching for Brennan's claimed opposition to torture back when it mattered, solely because he's "honest"), and Kappes involved in covering up the Salt Pit killing of Gul Rahman, among other things. So they're not exactly neutral on the contributions of people who cover up the CIA's torture program. While the selection of these three is being spun as expertise (I suspect they were also selected because Dianne Feinstein respects them, though that's a guess), it should be clear that they are not neutral on torture.

But I'm just as amused at how this process – Brennan's fairly transparent attempt to outsource the morally repugnant decision to promote someone involved in torture and its cover-up – undermines all the carefully cultivated claims about Brennan's role as the priest serving as a moral compass for others, at least on the drone program.

Among other descriptions offered of the guy in charge of drone assassinations, Harold Koh described him as a priest.

"If John Brennan is the last guy in the room with the president, I'm comfortable, because Brennan is a person of genuine moral rectitude," Mr. Koh said. "It's as though you had a priest with extremely strong moral values who was suddenly charged with leading a war."

That same formulation—moral rectitude—shows up in Karen DeYoung's profile of John Brennan today.

Some White House aides describe him as a nearly priest-like

presence in their midst, with a moral depth leavened by a dry, Irish wit.

One CIA colleague, former general counsel John Rizzo, recalled his rectitude surfacing in unexpected ways. Brennan once questioned Rizzo's use of the "BCC" function in the agency's e-mail system to send a blind copy of a message to a third party without the primary recipient's knowledge.

"He wasn't joking," Rizzo said. "He regarded that as underhanded."

Back when Brennan's boosters were promising he'd be a controlling figure at CIA, they suggested he'd make these decisions based on a priest-like moral compass.

Yet, just weeks into the job, he has instead asked those who benefitted from this woman's cover-up to bless her promotion, thereby dodging the responsibility himself.

I warned that this moral rectitude thing was just a myth when Brennan was nominated. It sure didn't take long to be proven right.