

“TOGETHER, WE ALL PREVAIL”

For a 1,500-word Shane Harris piece that could be part of Lawfare’s Empathy for Wiretappers series (brought to you by NSA contractor Northrop Grumman!), Stewart Baker blames the White House failure to mount a vocal defense of NSA on John Brennan’s departure.

“I think actually this is the first signal that John Brennan is gone,” said Baker, the former NSA general counsel. “I think that if Brennan had still been there he would have immediately appreciated the importance, and communicated that to the president, of defending the program.”

John Brennan, of course, played a key role in rationalizing Dick Cheney’s illegal wiretap program, and therefore not only has a stake in protecting NSA, but also in insisting that the current program – which is just a rehashed version of the illegal program – is critical for detecting terrorists.

By comparison, Lisa Monaco, whom Baker implicitly criticizes (and the article explicitly notes) for her silence in the face of NSA’s problems, headed DOJ’s National Security Division from ~~2010~~ 2011 until this year, and so likely had to deal with the aftermath of the phone dragnet problems, the full brunt of the Internet dragnet problems (which purportedly got shut down under her tenure), and the upstream collection problems – all three “features” of the illegal program that never got shut down when it moved under FISA Court supervision, and got called “bugs” when DOJ (Monaco!) had to reveal them.

And while the piece provides interesting new details about White House’s chilly relationship with a man they’ve nevertheless given vastly increasing amounts of power to,

The weak backing from top administration officials has aggravated the relationship between Alexander and the White House, where he has never been warmly embraced.

[snip]

Alexander has never been especially close to Obama or White House officials. Some thought he had tried to amass too much surveillance authority without appreciating the legal constraints on his agency, according to a former administration official. "I don't understand why the White House didn't throw Alexander under the bus," the official added.

It actually doesn't consider whether the Administration might be pursuing a conscious strategy of weakening Alexander's considerable power (I have no reason to believe they are, but I can imagine why they might want to weaken someone who has only expanded his power since 2005 and got caught in serial fuck-ups as well).

It also doesn't consider the possibility that one reason NSA employees are dispirited is because they're learning about programs that violate the self-image they've got of their Agency.

Former intelligence officials who remain in regular contact with those still in government say that morale at the NSA is low, both because of the reaction to leaks by former contractor Edward Snowden, which put the normally secretive agency under intense scrutiny, and because of budget cutbacks and the continuing government shutdown, which has left some employees furloughed without pay.

Ah well. The NSA spokesperson is issuing slogans, so all is well in the national security

world.

An NSA spokesperson downplayed any rift between the agency and the administration. "National security is a team sport. For us, collaboration is built into the very fabric of who we are," said Vanee Vines. "There is no truth to rumors of dissension between NSA and the administration regarding the Agency's mission to help defend the nation and save lives. Together, we all prevail."

Together, we all prevail.