

KEITH ALEXANDER: THE ONE GENERAL OBAMA DIDN'T FIRE

Obama has developed a reputation for firing Generals (so much so the wingnuts have developed some conspiracy theories about it).

Most famously, of course, he fired Stanley McChrystal for insubordination. He ousted CENTCOM Commander James Mattis early because of dissent on Iran policy (what on retrospect, with the distance and this AP report, might have been opposition to the back channel discussions that led to this weekend's interim nuclear deal). A slew of Generals have been fired for offenses including drinking, fucking (including sexual abuse), swearing, and cheating at poker, as well as abusing their positions (Hamm, Gaouette, Baker, Roberts, Sinclair, Giardina, Carry, Huntoon). Obama accepted then CIA Director David Petraeus's resignation, ostensibly for fucking, too, but even before that kept refusing Petraeus the promotions he thought he deserved. Generals Gurganus and Sturdevant got fired for not sufficiently defending a big base in Afghanistan.

It's that background that makes the premise of this WSJ piece on NSA so unconvincing. It presents the fact that General Keith Alexander offered – but Obama did not accept – his resignation as proof of how significantly the Snowden leaks have affected NSA.

Shortly after former government contractor Edward Snowden revealed himself in June as the source of leaked National Security Agency documents, the agency's director, Gen. Keith Alexander, offered to resign, according to a senior U.S. official.

The offer, which hasn't previously been reported, was declined by the Obama administration. But it shows the degree

to which Mr. Snowden's revelations have shaken the NSA's foundations—unlike any event in its six-decade history, including the blowback against domestic spying in the 1970s.

[snip]

When the leaks began, some top administration officials found their confidence in Gen. Alexander shaken because he presided over a grave security lapse, a former senior defense official said. But the officials also didn't think his resignation would solve the security problem and were concerned that letting him leave would wrongly hand Mr. Snowden a win, the former defense official said.

Even before Edward Snowden started working for the NSA via Booz, Alexander had presided over — by his own provably exaggerated admission — the plunder of America via cybertheft.

Then, on top of that purportedly catastrophic failure, Snowden served to demonstrate how easy it was to walk away with details on some of NSA's most sensitive ops.

And yet the guy who left the entire US Internet as well as NSA's codebreaking exposed — as compared to a single base in Afghanistan — did not get fired for his failures.

Because that might wrongly hand Snowden a win, apparently.

That's the real tell. The article provides new details on an effort to weigh the value of wiretapping elite targets. But the rest of the article quotes hawks like Dutch Ruppersberger and Mike Rogers complaining about the risk of big new controls that might end the Golden Age of SIGINT while — again — focusing almost exclusively on the wiretapping of elites (the article includes one paragraph predicting a compromise on the dragnet programs, not noting,

of course, how much of the dragnet has already moved overseas).

Broad new controls, though, run the risk of overcorrecting, leaving the agency unable to respond to a future crisis, critics of the expected changes warn.

[snip]

Another change under consideration is placing a civilian in charge of the NSA for the first time after Gen. Alexander leaves next spring, as he has been planning to do. Deputy Defense Secretary Ashton Carter is advocating internally for the change, according to current and former officials. Mr. Carter declined to comment.

“We’re getting clobbered, and we want a better story to tell than: ‘It’s under review, and everybody does it,’ ” the senior administration official said, speaking of the U.S. belief that other governments routinely electronic eavesdrop on foreign leaders.

There’s one more odd part of this story. It claims that after 9/11, the NSA was pilloried for its lapses leading up to the attack.

After the 2001 terrorist attacks, the NSA was pilloried for missing clues of the plot. It reinvented itself as a terrorist-hunting machine, channeling its computing power to zero in on suspects any time they communicated.

That’s not what happened. The National Security establishment has repeatedly, falsely portrayed NSA’s failure to realize Khalid al-Mihdhar was calling an Al Qaeda line in Yemen and CIA’s failure to share information about Mihdhar’s travel. And none of the 9/11 Commission’s recommendations address NSA (by the time of the report, the “wall” between intelligence and FBI,

which otherwise would have been a recommendation, had been down for almost 3 years). But beyond that, no one has scrutinized NSA's collections (in part because they include damning intercepts implicating the Saudis).

Moreover, the claim that this dragnet exists solely to "zero in on suspects any time they communicated" ignores the shift from terrorism to cybersecurity.

In short, while WSJ's sources seem to be claiming catastrophe, the story they're telling is business as usual.

Obama has fired Generals for failure to protect a single base, not to mention cheating at poker. He seems intent on keeping Alexander – at least to get through this scandal – precisely because he's so good at cheating at (metaphorical) poker.