

THE OBAMA AS CIVIL LIBERTARIAN PROPAGANDA ROLLS OUT

Remember back in May 2012, when Daniel Klaidman (and the NYT), rolled out stories about the White House imposing new order on the drone program. The initial roll-out stories adopted the new White House euphemism – Terrorist Attack Disruption Strikes or TADS – in lieu of the previously used “signature strike” or more accurate “untargeted drone strike.” But in stories masquerading as comprehensive, neither made any mention of the death of 16 year old American citizen Abdulrahman al-Awlaki.

And remember back in February 2013, when Klaidman rolled out claims that John Brennan would not only change the drone targeting rules at CIA, but roll back the war on terror altogether? That article didn’t see any contradiction with treating Brennan’s claims as honest when trying to argue he approved signature strikes in Yemen yet admitting he had twice opposed them. Once again, a purportedly comprehensive article – even one focused on Yemen – didn’t mention Abdulrahman al-Awlaki.

And remember when, a month later, Klaidman proclaimed, “Exclusive: No More Drones for CIA”? I predicted then, based on the evidence of John Brennan’s formal statements to Congress and actions rather than credulously treated anonymous claims, it was wrong.

I was right.

Well, yesterday Klaidman was out with another big counterterrorism scoop, this one promising that “Obama’s Defining Fight” would be “how he will take on the NSA’s surveillance state in 2014.” It dedicates 2,200 words to supporting this proposition.

Throughout his presidency he has struggled, even agonized, over how to balance security and liberty in an age of terror.

[snip]

Obama's willingness to go back and reform his own counterterrorism policies sometimes has led him to give up power or place it under tighter constraints, an unusual characteristic, given that most presidents try to enhance executive authority, especially in the national security arena. Obama, on the contrary, ordered a policy review toward the end of his first term that eventually placed greater restraints on his targeted killing program, resulting in fewer strikes.

His trajectory on surveillance fits the pattern. [my emphasis]

Klaidman apparently doesn't see the contradiction with the conclusion of his tale.

Sometime in January, Obama plans to deliver a major speech laying out his own blueprint for surveillance reform.

That is, ultimately Obama plans his own "reform." Which not only keeps the authority for "reform" in the Executive's hands – protecting executive authority – but almost certainly stops short of the reasonable but by no means adequate changes proposed by his Review Group.

More importantly, in a story focusing on the reform proposals offered by his Review Group that Obama apparently may accept, Klaidman once again has one of his increasingly characteristic black holes in the middle of the story.

Klaidman reports on Obama's openness to entertain his NSA Review Group's recommendations. Yet he makes not one mention of the Group's recommendation that Director of NSA

and CyberCommand be split, and that a civilian lead the former organization. This is one of the most important structural reforms proposed by the Review Group.

Nor does Klaidman mention that Obama has already pre-empted that recommendation publicly after having learned of it, announcing that the position would remain joined and in military hands.

This, in an article that portrays Obama getting miffed at General Alexander (and credulously reporting Alexander's laughable—and more limited claim, in reality—that no one knew that NSA hadn't turned off deliberate features of the illegal dragnet after FISC excluded those features from the dragnet.

But behind the scenes, Obama was showing some irritation with the intelligence leadership that had pressed for these capabilities and repeatedly vouched for their value. One story that rocketed around the intelligence community involved a meeting between the president and NSA Director Keith Alexander. Alexander, who holds advanced degrees in physics and electronic warfare, was trying to explain certain aspects of one of the surveillance programs to Obama. As his highly technical and jargon-laden presentation rambled on, Obama was beginning to lose patience. When Alexander finished, the president thanked him and then icily asked if he could do it over again, "but this time in English."

While it went unstated at the time, Obama may have felt frustrated that the complexity of the technology was overwhelming policymakers. Even Alexander had publicly conceded that no single person at the NSA had the wherewithal to understand the metadata program in all its dimensions.

Obama already made it clear that certain issues – as it happens, issues that might rein in the national security state – are not up for deliberation. And yet Klaidman makes no mention of that evidence refuting his central premise, even while pretending Obama will and has stood up to Alexander.

Don't get me wrong. These tales from Klaidman are useful, because so few other reporters get this access. But given the black holes that persist at the center of Klaidman's scoops, it's advisable to take his factoids as potentially fictional details, floating completely independently of the narrative he places them in. Because his narratives increasingly have enormous holes precisely where the known evidence exists.