

THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY CASTS ITS VOTE FOR HILLARY CLINTON

Since Donald Trump all-but sealed the nomination the other day, there has been a bit of a tizzy because he'll receive intelligence briefing(s). Several spooks and former spooks complained to the Daily Beast that Trump might run his mouth and let something slip.

And that prospect has some spies sweating. Trump, who can't seem to dam his stream of consciousness on Twitter, and who has lately taken to spreading rumors and conspiracy theories on national television, has never been privy to national secrets. Nor has he ever demonstrated that he's capable of keeping them.

"My concern with Trump will be that he inadvertently leaks, because as he speaks extemporaneously, he'll pull something out of his hat that he heard in a briefing and say it," said a former senior U.S. intelligence official who has participated in the process of briefing presidential candidates.

[snip]

"It's not an unreasonable concern that he'll talk publicly about what's supposed to stay in that room," said another former senior intelligence official.

A currently serving U.S. official echoed some of those anxieties and wondered whether Trump would respect the discretion of the briefing and not use it to his advantage on the campaign trail.

The DB piece admits that Hillary is under investigation for mishandling classified information, with her presumptive National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan among the staffers who forwarded emails the CIA claims (dubiously) to be super secret (curiously, this flurry of Trump briefing stories came on the same date the FBI was leaking to CNN that thus far they've got nothing against Hillary). It doesn't mention that Leon Panetta, who leaked classified information for political gain, is also among Hillary's advisors.

WaPo's Greg Miller airs more concerns from the spooks, including that intelligence briefers would be uncomfortable briefing people who have close business ties to rivals or adversaries, not to mention people who espouse torture.

Analysts selected for such assignments tend to be among the most polished and experienced in the intelligence community. "They are going to be very professional," Peritz said, but Trump poses unique complications. "He has all kinds of relationships with Chinese investors and Russian investors. He's spoken very highly of our adversaries. And he's talked about using torture and waterboarding and attacking people's families. All these things are going through the analysts' minds."

Huh? The CIA doesn't have anyone left over who briefed Dick Cheney? Because *those* guys surely knew he talked about torture and waterboarding! Or how about the folks who briefed Obama before someone killed Anwar al-Awlaki's teenage son? And if Hillary, with all her ties to Clinton Global Initiatives people, can be briefed, I'm not sure why Trump can't, with his business ties. It's not as if the Russians and Chinese haven't already stolen the secrets that Trump would get.

Look. Michele Bachmann served on the House Intelligence Committee for four years. She's

every bit as unpredictable as Donald Trump. And aside from that time she claimed that jihadis had already tried to penetrate 6 of the 15 Pakistani nuclear sites that were vulnerable – a detail that had already been reported to the press – *she* never ran her mouth more than, say, Marco Rubio when he leaked details about the implementation of USA Freedom Act earlier this year.

The point is, all this *Sturm und Drang* about Trump getting intelligence briefings ignores all the other leakage that already goes on by people the Intelligence Community doesn't seem worried about briefing. All the more so given what Charlie Savage notes – that this is just one limited briefing; Trump won't get to learn the good stuff until after he wins the Presidency.

Michael J. Morell, a former deputy C.I.A. director, who regularly briefed Mr. Obama before retiring in 2013, said the postconvention nominee briefing would last several hours. The idea is to “get them to understand that they have now stepped into a bigger world” in which foreign allies, adversaries, and neutral parties are paying close attention to whatever they say, and that their words may have broad consequences, he said.

Michael E. Leiter, a former director of the National Counterterrorism Center, provided the terrorism portion of the briefing that Mr. Obama received after he became the Democratic nominee in 2008. Mr. Leiter said the post-convention briefings lay out a significant amount of important and sensitive information.

“You are not trying to give them a tactical update on the issues of the day, but to lay out the full panoply of issues that they are going to face; the good, the bad, and the ugly of what the world looks like and what implications

there may be going forward," he said.

Both former officials said that the postconvention briefing for nominees would contain top secret information, but not a discussion of the sources and methods used to gather it, or any description of covert operations.

Raising the specter of classified information is nice. But this seems to be more a statement of preference for Hillary Clinton, and a continuation of the status quo, with all its questionable aggression, than a case against Trump, no matter how bad his foreign policy would be (though his domestic policy against minorities would be worse than his foreign policy). The spooks want Hillary and a continuation of their current plans.

Plus, all this whining ignores something else.

Although the Executive does so by very broadly interpreting the relevant precedents, for decades, Presidents have claimed – and the Intelligence Community has backed that claim fully – that they have unlimited discretion to classify or declassify information. The idea is that if some guy can get elected, he can decide what counts as classified in this country.

If that would be a problem with Trump, then maybe *now* is the time to start thinking about codifying some limits to giving popularly elected Presidents unfettered discretion to play with classified information? I, frankly, don't want Hillary to have that authority either (or any President!). You never know when someone is going to leak an officer's identity just for political gain, after all.

But the IC has for decades agreed with a system in which the President has complete, arbitrary control over what counts as classified. That's the underlying problem. Not that Donald Trump might get a single intelligence briefing.