

SABRINA DE SOUSA AND THE DRONE MEMO

Jason Leopold has a long piece on Sabrina de Sousa, the former CIA operative who got screwed over in the aftermath of the Abu Omar rendition.

Leopold's piece focuses on de Sousa's efforts to call attention to how stupid the rendition was. He includes her correspondence with a range of people – from Condi Rice to Colin Powell to Hillary to Dianne Feinstein's staff – she tried to reach out to. As such, Leopold's piece is yet another case showing the intelligence whistleblowers can't use "proper channels" to expose wrong-doing they find.

But I wanted to focus on a more narrow point de Sousa makes about Abu Omar's rendition, one that – in the wake of the release of the Awlaki killing memo – is of particular significance. One problem with Abu Omar's rendition, de Sousa notes, is that none of the conditions normally present for extraordinary renditions were present. The fact that Italy was already closely watching him meant the US didn't have to intervene to neutralize him.

There was nothing definitive in the classified cables, De Sousa says, about the threat the CIA said Abu Omar posed to national security as the rendition operation was being planned. "The cable was full of 'suspected of,' 'alleged to.' Nothing that said 'he was responsible for.' Nothing definitive," De Sousa says.

De Sousa describes her CIA colleagues in Rome and Cairo as acting like keystone cops in the aftermath of Abu Omar's rendition, trying to figure out who had the evidence against him to present to Egypt so he could be prosecuted.

"The CIA station chief in Cairo said to Jeffrey Castelli [CIA station chief in

Rome] 'Where's the evidence?' Castelli said, 'I thought you had the information.' And Cairo said, 'We don't have it. We thought you had it.' Castelli says, 'We don't have it.' Then Cairo says, "We issued this arrest warrant on your behalf. So where is the evidence?" The blunder ultimately forced Egypt to set Abu Omar free.

"This is exactly when the whole cover-up started," she says. "It turns out there was a big miscommunication between Cairo Station and Rome Station. There wasn't any prosecutable evidence against Abu Omar. It's why he was never picked up by the Italians. But Castelli decided he wanted a rendition and he got one."

[snip]

"Abu Omar was a nobody," De Sousa says. "The renditions are meant for imminent, very dangerous threats and [are meant to be used in]countries that are incapable of laws that would allow them to pick up people who pose threats to national security. They're not meant for a country like Italy already following the guy around."

Those trying to dismiss the seriousness of the Anwar al-Awlaki memo, after all, say it's not that big of a deal, given that most Americans of concern would be in places – like, say, Milan – where they could easily be seized by local authorities, and therefore would never need to be drone killed.

And rendition is obviously the step short of drone killing. There's little risk CIA will start flying drones over Milan (and if they did, Italy has the capability to shoot them down).

Nevertheless, the Abu Omar case is one reason why you can never say the conditions laid out in the memo will always protect Americans from being drone killed – or just as likely, simply

killed – based on claims about a country's ability to arrest and turn over someone.

Those same conditions should have protected Abu Omar. Yet, because some guy was bucking for a promotion, they didn't.