



## The buck stops where?

By: Gene Healy, Vice President at the Cato Institute  
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"Hey, don't look at me -- I'm just the president!" That's the common thread in President Obama's response to his recent scandal eruptions, from IRS harassment of Tea Partiers to his Justice Department's spying on AP reporters. Like everybody else, Obama learns about these things via cable news, according to press secretary Jay Carney.

Obama's flight from responsibility punctured the stratosphere in his recent speech on "the Future of Our Fight against Terrorism" at the National Defense University in D.C. In the speech Obama seemed to position himself as the loyal opposition to his own administration.

He worried that "perpetual war ... will prove self-defeating, and alter our country in troubling ways." Look at the current situation at Guantanamo Bay, Citizen Obama chided, "where we are force-feeding detainees who are being held on a hunger strike ... Is this who we are? Is that something our founders foresaw?" Obama pronounced himself "troubled" by the proliferation of drone strikes in an ever-expanding war and "the possibility that leak investigations may chill the investigative journalism that holds government accountable."

All valid concerns, compassionately expressed. So how can we get this guy into the room when the big decisions are being made?

Whoever it is that's been in charge for the last four-plus years has waged an unprecedented "war on whistleblowers" with a record number of leak prosecutions. He's radically expanded drone strikes and the theaters in which drones operate -- and his top national security officials foresee at least another decade of robot warfare. The dronings will continue until morale improves.

As the Brookings Institution's Benjamin Wittes points out, Obama doesn't need congressional approval to "get off of a war footing. He can do it himself." Instead, Wittes writes, the president used the NDU speech "to rebuke his own administration for taking the positions it has -- but also to make sure that it could continue to do so." For its sheer, brazen phoniness, the NDU speech should be a scandal in itself. What about the domestic scandals currently roiling the administration? Though it makes me want to break out the world's smallest violin, I have to admit there's something to David Axelrod's lament that because "the government is so vast," it's become almost "impossible" to manage. "You go through these [controversies]," the former Obama consigliere told MSNBC, "because of this stuff that is impossible to know if you're the president or working in the White House, and yet you're responsible for it and it's a difficult situation."

Maybe so: "the sheer size of federal government creates an impossible management paradox," Cornell law professor Cynthia Farina observed in a 2010 article; with 15 Cabinet departments, over 160 different federal agencies with regulatory authority, and some two million civilian employees in the executive branch, the idea that strong presidential leadership can bring "coherence, rationality, and accountability to the vast U.S. regulatory enterprise is unrealistic, if not completely implausible."

Thus, with the IRS imbroglio, for example, it may well be the case that (to rework the old joke from the Reagan era) the left hand doesn't know what the far-left hand is doing. But surely it's not too much to expect the president to keep tabs on his own attorney general - one of the four original Cabinet posts dating to 1789.

Moreover, it's pretty rich to hear complaints about the vast federal bureaucracy from people ideologically devoted to making it vaster still. And it's utterly galling to hear the president complain, in the NDU speech, about decisions he personally made.

President Bush's "I'm the Decider" attitude sounded arrogant and grating at the time, but Obama's denial of responsibility just might make us grow nostalgic for it.

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