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CIA, GOP and Obama versus 'the real facts'

On the wall of CIA headquarters is this challenging message from the New Testament: "And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." Veering sharply from this acknowledgment was the demand sent to the Obama administration by seven former CIA directors (Washington Post, Sept. 18) that Attorney General Eric Holder stop his preliminary investigation of fewer than 10 cases in which CIA interrogators of terrorism suspects may have exceeded Justice Department guidelines.

By: Nat Henthoff, First Amendment, The Jamestown Sun

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Joining such former CIA heads as George Tenet and Michael Hayden in their conviction that national security will be damaged by further chilling CIA interrogators' effectiveness (because of more investigations) were six Republican members of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, who declared (Washington Post, Sept. 26) "that they will no longer participate in an investigation into the Bush administration's interrogation policies" by that Senate committee.

The alarmed Republican senators agree with President Obama's pledge to "look forward, not backward." But, on the other hand, along with the indignant former CIA directors, these senators, like many other congressional Republicans, disagree with Abraham Lincoln's currently unfashionable principle:

"I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts."

Agreeing with President Lincoln's confidence in "We the People," 12 former intelligence officers and analysts sent a letter (Common Dreams, Sept. 28) to President Obama in "strong support for Attorney General Eric Holder's authorization of a wider investigation into CIA interrogation. We respectfully disagree with the direct appeal to you by seven former CIA directors to quash that wider investigation."

These dissenting truth-seekers included CIA veterans going back to the regime of CIA Director Allen Dulles, which began in 1953. They cite the recently released explosive 2004 investigation by former CIA Inspector General John Helgerson, showing "the role of CIA directors in issuing orders that led to inappropriate behavior, and their failure to hold officers accountable."

This dereliction of duty at the top of the CIA, say the 12 alumni of the intelligence services, "helped create the environment in which abuses occurred."

It's no wonder that the seven former CIA directors are insistent that there be no investigations of the shadowy past. Indeed, the 12 former intelligence professionals fully understand the objections of the CIA chiefs, telling President Obama in their letter to him:

"Among the former CIA directors who ... asked you to 'reverse' the attorney general's decision are ... some who were cognizant of and involved in decisions that led to the abuses in question. We find that troubling."

So should President Obama be troubled.

This is hardly the first time we hear whistleblowers with extensive experience within the CIA. Inspector General Helgerson credited troubled CIA agents for telling him of their concerns as he was researching his 2004 report. And Shane Harris, in revealing "No More Secrets in Langley?" (National Journal, Sept. 26), confirms that:

"Throughout 2003, investigators in the inspector general's office reviewed more than two year's worth of the CIA's interrogation activities, interviewing officers who feared their actions would be exposed publicly and that they would face criminal prosecution and abandonment by their bosses."

The Helgerson report added: "A number of agency officers expressed unsolicited concern about the possibility of incrimination or legal action resulting from their participation. A number of officers expressed concern that a human-rights group might pursue them," and one of them feared being hauled before the World Court on charges of having been involved on war crimes. And, if that dreaded day came, they believed "the agency would not stand behind them."

I hope that some brave person high in the Obama administration will show President Obama the Shane Harris article, "No More Secrets in Langley?" which — after citing the New Testament's adjuration on the wall of CIA headquarters that the "truth shall make you free" — notes:

"The CIA has never been exclusively interested in truth. But it has survived this long by knowing it (the truth), and often by being the only one to know it. Those days are over."

Among the many resounding, continually contemporary quotes from Justice Louis Brandeis through decades, the most famous — and one that President Obama cannot continue to escape — is: "Sunlight is the best disinfectant."

Brandeis also continually reminds us: "Those who won our independence through revolution were not cowards. ... They did not exalt order at the cost of liberty."

And the Founders certainly did not fear looking backward. Nor should "We The People of the United States." What would the Founders have thought of

the six Republican members of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence who could not bear hearing and acting on "the real facts" (in Lincoln's words) — and ran out of the hearing room?

Nat Hentoff is a nationally renowned authority on the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights. He is a member of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, and the Cato Institute, where he is a senior fellow.

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