

# How 'Looking Forward' Tripped Up Obama

**Exclusive:** President Obama has stumbled into a constitutional firefight between the CIA and Senate Intelligence Committee over the spy agency's attempted cover-up of its Bush-era torture practices, a clash he could have averted by wielding a declassification stamp, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

When historians set off to write the story of Barack Obama's administration, they will have to struggle with why the 44<sup>th</sup> President chose not to hold his predecessor accountable for grave crimes of state and why he failed to take control of his own foreign policy.

This failure, which began with Obama's early decision to "look forward, not backward" and to retain much of George W. Bush's national security bureaucracy, has now led Obama into a scandal over the CIA's resistance to the Senate Intelligence Committee drafting of a long-delayed report on the Bush-era policy of torturing "war on terror" detainees.

This clash surfaced publicly on Tuesday when Senate Intelligence Committee chair Dianne Feinstein delivered an extraordinary speech on the Senate floor accusing the CIA of sabotaging the panel's oversight work through subterfuge and legal threats.

But the biggest mystery may be why the Obama White House has been so solicitous of the CIA's desire to keep secret the history of a torture program authorized by President George W. Bush and overseen by Vice President Dick Cheney. As Commander in Chief, President Obama has the ultimate say over what stays classified and what gets declassified.

Yet, as the CIA has dragged its feet about declassifying what are now historical records by claiming factual inaccuracies the Obama White House has adopted a posture of powerless supplicant. "We've made clear that we want to see the report's findings declassified," said White House spokesman Jay Carney, as if the President has no power over this process.

Obama could simply issue a declassification order that would allow the release of both the Senate's 6,300-page report and an internal CIA review (with whatever redactions would be appropriate). If the CIA wishes to dispute some of the Senate's findings, it could issue a rebuttal, which is how such disputes have been handled throughout U.S. history.

If every government report required that the party being criticized agree to

every detail of the allegations, no report would ever be issued. This idea that secretive CIA officials, who have already obstructed the investigation by destroying videotape of the torture sessions, should now have the right to block the report's release indefinitely grants the spy agency what amounts to blanket immunity for whatever it does.

So, the question is why. Why does President Obama continue letting holdovers from the Bush administration, including current CIA Director John Brennan, control U.S. national security policies more than five years after President Bush and Vice President Cheney left office?

### **The Ukraine Crisis**

A similar question arises over the Ukraine crisis in which neoconservative holdovers, such as Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, and the U.S.-funded National Endowment for Democracy were allowed to spur on the violent coup that overthrew democratically elected President Viktor Yanukovich and precipitated a dangerous confrontation with Russia.

This Ukraine "regime change" served neocon interests by driving a wedge between President Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin, disrupting their behind-the-scenes relationship that has proved useful in averting U.S. wars in Syria and Iran, conflicts that the neocons have long wanted as part of their grand plan for remaking the Middle East.

Nuland's husband, former Reagan administration official Robert Kagan, was a co-founder of the Project for the New American Century, which in 1998 called for the first step in this "regime change" strategy by seeking a U.S. invasion of Iraq. After the neocons gained control of U.S. foreign policy under President Bush, the Iraq invasion went ahead in 2003, but the occupation proved disastrous and put off the next stages, "regime change" in Syria and Iran.

Barack Obama's election in 2008 was, in part, driven by public revulsion over the bloody conflict in Iraq and revelations about the torture of detainees and other crimes that surrounded Bush's post-9/11 "war on terror." Yet, after winning the White House, Obama shied away from a clean break from Bush's policies.

Obama was persuaded to staff much of his national security team with "a team of rivals," which meant retaining Bush's Defense Secretary Robert Gates (something no previous president had ever done), appointing hawkish Sen. Hillary Clinton to be Secretary of State, and ordering no shake-up of Bush's military high command, including media-favorite Gen. David Petraeus.

Longtime CIA apparatchik Brennan, who was implicated in some of Bush's most

controversial actions, was named Obama's White House counterterrorism adviser. As former CIA analyst Ray McGovern wrote, Brennan was "a senior CIA official during President George W. Bush's 'dark side' days of waterboarding detainees, renditioning suspects to Mideast torture centers and making up intelligence to invade Iraq."

Part of the reason for Obama's timidity may have been his lack of experience and his fear that any missteps would be seized on by his opponents to question his fitness for the job. By surrounding himself with Bush's advisers and Democratic adversaries, he may have thought that he was keeping them safely inside his tent.

The Democratic Party also has a very thin bench of national security experts. Official Washington has been so dominated by foreign policy "tough-guy-ism" for decades at least since Ronald Reagan crushed Jimmy Carter in 1980 that most Democrats who could survive a congressional confirmation hearing have had to bow to this prevailing sentiment.

There's also the U.S. news media, which readily joins any war-fevered stampede. Obama may have calculated that his presidency would have been trampled by endless recriminations if he had fully repudiated Bush's legacy.

### **Getting Sucked In**

But the consequences of these trade-offs have been severe. For instance, Gates wrote in his memoir *Duty* that he was persuaded to support an Afghan War "surge" of 30,000 troops by neocon theorist Frederick Kagan (Robert's brother and Victoria Nuland's brother-in-law). Though Obama was skeptical, the plan was backed by Petraeus (and other Bush-promoted generals) and Secretary of State Clinton. Ultimately, Obama acquiesced, to his later regret.

Arguably, there were similarities between Obama's predicament and what confronted a young President John F. Kennedy when he took office in 1961 with the "red scares" of the McCarthy era still fresh in the minds of badly scarred Democrats. Kennedy was persuaded by holdovers from the Eisenhower administration, such as CIA Director Allen Dulles and some of the Pentagon's high command, to press ahead with the Bay of Pigs invasion against Cuba.

After that disaster, Kennedy ousted Dulles and developed his own informal circle of foreign policy advisers, including his brother Attorney General Robert Kennedy. During the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, President Kennedy relied on these close advisers to counter the pressure from senior generals to escalate this nuclear Cold War confrontation.

Kennedy appeared ready to chart a course toward greater cooperation with Soviet

leaders and to disengage from Vietnam at the time of his assassination on Nov. 22, 1963, though it will never be known how Kennedy would have ultimately addressed those challenges if he had won reelection in 1964.

However, after Kennedy's death, President Lyndon Johnson agreed to Pentagon calls for sending combat troops to Vietnam. The historical record shows that Johnson's decisions were influenced by his fears that otherwise Democrats would be accused of "losing" Indochina, much as Sen. Joe McCarthy and other right-wingers had accused them of "losing" China.

Despite some parallels between the Kennedy-Johnson era and the present, Obama's secretive conduct of his foreign policy without offering a thorough explication to the public may be unprecedented. While displaying a surface "tough-guy-ism" of counterterrorism, including drone strikes and Special Forces raids, such as killing Osama bin Laden, Obama has maneuvered quietly toward a slow and steady pullback from America's war footing.

To continue that process often in the face of belligerent rhetoric from key members of Congress and prominent U.S. pundits Obama has relied not only on an inner circle at the White House (buttressed by some sympathetic CIA analysts), but on cooperation from President Putin and other Russian leaders.

### **Not Taking Command**

Though the original "team of rivals" is gone (Gates in mid-2011, Petraeus after a sex scandal in late 2012, and Clinton in early 2013), Obama still has not grabbed control of his national security apparatus. Secretary of State John Kerry often behaves as if he thinks he's President John McCain's top diplomat or a captive of the hawkish State Department bureaucracy, the likes of Nuland and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power.

For example, amid murky evidence regarding a chemical weapons attack in Syria, Kerry delivered what sounded like a declaration of war on Aug. 30, 2013, only to have Obama walk the U.S. bombing threats back over the next few weeks and finally put them to rest with the help of Putin who got the Syrian regime to agree to surrender all of its chemical weapons.

Similarly, Obama and Putin oversaw the hammering out of a framework to resolve the Iran nuclear dispute last November. Kerry was supposed to go to Geneva and sign the deal, but instead inserted some last-minute poison-pill language advocated by the French (who were carrying water for the Saudis), causing a breakdown of the talks. I'm told that White House officials then instructed Kerry to return and sign the deal, which he finally did.

But Obama's back-pocket foreign policy and the extra energy that such an

indirect management style requires have allowed for some serious mischief-making by neocons in the government and their sympathizers in the media, especially in areas of the world where Obama has not directed his personal attention.

The crisis in Ukraine apparently caught the President off-guard, even though elements of the U.S. government were stoking the fires of political unrest on Russia's border. Assistant Secretary Nuland was openly advocating for Ukraine's "European aspirations" and literally passing out cookies to anti-government protesters.

Meanwhile, the U.S.-funded National Endowment for Democracy (essentially a three-decade-old neocon-controlled slush fund that pours money into "democracy building" or destabilization campaigns depending on your point of view), was running 65 projects in Ukraine. Last September, NED's president Carl Gershman called Ukraine "the biggest prize" and expressed hope that "Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself."

In other words, even as Obama leaned on Putin to avert more wars in the Middle East, the U.S. government was seeking to embarrass and undermine Putin at home. Not surprisingly, this double-dealing has provoked the Russian government's suspicion and confusion, made worse because the latest U.S. media swagger in support of the coup regime in Kiev has forced Obama to puff out his own chest and do some breast-beating at Putin's expense.

One Putin adviser compared Obama's treatment of Putin to a married man with a mistress who when things get touchy pretends not to know the mistress.

Now, Obama's reluctance to confront the CIA over its Bush-era crimes has created another controversy. CIA Director John Brennan is resisting release of investigative reports critical of the CIA's torture policies, a standoff that, in turn, has led to alleged CIA efforts to intimidate and spy on staff members of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Washington Post columnist Dana Milbank has dubbed the public clash between Sen. Feinstein, defending the committee's investigation, and Director Brennan, defending the CIA's reaction to the investigation, "a true Obama scandal." Milbank noted the seriousness of the controversy as Feinstein accuses "Obama's CIA of illegal and unconstitutional actions violating the separation of powers by searching the committee's computers and intimidating congressional staffers with bogus legal threats."

At the heart of this "scandal" is Obama's decision to let Brennan have control over an investigation that threatened to embarrass if not directly implicate Brennan in Bush's torture of detainees. The problem could have been avoided if

Obama had simply asserted his presidential authority to declassify the torture reports in a timely fashion.

But Obama seems to feel that even though he's been Commander in Chief for half a decade he still must tread softly to avoid upsetting the Bush holdovers and their many influential friends in Official Washington. It's an attitude that historians may find puzzling.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).**

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## Sen. Feinstein: Accidental 'Whistleblower'

President Obama has stumbled into a scandal created by his determination to protect dirty secrets on torture and other CIA crimes committed by the Bush-43 administration. The unlikely "whistleblower" is another Democratic defender of CIA abuses, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, notes Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

Who knows, soon we might see headlines and cable TV shows asking: "Is Dianne Feinstein a whistleblower or a traitor?" A truthful answer to that question could not possibly be "whistleblower."

It may already be a historic fact that Sen. Feinstein's speech on March 11, 2014, blew a whistle on CIA surveillance of the Senate Intelligence Committee, which she chairs. But if that makes her a whistleblower, then Colonel Sanders is a vegetarian evangelist.

In her blockbuster Tuesday speech on the Senate floor, Feinstein charged that the CIA's intrusions on her committee's computers quite possibly "violated the Fourth Amendment." You know, that's the precious amendment that Feinstein – more than any other senator – has powerfully treated like dirt, worthy only of sweeping under the congressional rug.

A tidy defender of the NSA's Orwellian programs, Feinstein went on the attack

against Edward Snowden from the outset of his revelations last June. Within days, she denounced his brave whistleblowing as “an act of treason” – a position she has maintained.

Snowden and other genuine whistleblowers actually take risks to defend the civil liberties and human rights of others, including the most vulnerable among us. Real whistleblowers choose to expose serious wrongdoing. And, if applicable, they renounce their own past complicity in doing those wrongs.

Dianne Feinstein remains in a very different place. She’s 180 degrees from a whistleblower orientation; her moral compass is magnetized with solipsism as a leading guardian of the surveillance state. This week, Feinstein stepped forward to tweak her tap dance – insisting that intrusive surveillance, so vile when directed at her and colleagues with august stature, must only be directed at others.

A huge problem is that for the USA’s top movers and shakers in media and politics, nothing rises to the level of constitutional crisis unless their noble oxen start to get gored. It doesn’t seem to dawn on the likes of Sen. Feinstein that Fourth Amendment protections for the few are not Fourth Amendment protections at all.

More than 40 years ago, under the Nixon administration – when the U.S. government was breaking into the offices of the Socialist Workers Party, busting into the homes of members of the Black Panther Party in the middle of night with guns firing, and widely shredding the civil liberties of anti-war activists – few among ruling elites seemed to give a damn. But when news emerged that one of the two big political parties had severely transgressed against the other with a break-in at the Watergate office of the Democratic National Committee on June 17, 1972, the Republican White House had gone too far.

As spring 2014 gets underway, we might be nearing a pivotal moment when major sectors of the establishment feel compelled to recognize the arrival of a constitutional crisis. Consider how the *New York Times* editorialized in its Wednesday edition, declaring that Feinstein “has provided stark and convincing evidence that the CIA may have committed crimes to prevent the exposure of interrogations that she said were ‘far different and far more harsh’ than anything the agency had described to Congress.”

In the euphemism lexicon of Official Washington, “far different and far more harsh” refers to outright torture by the U.S. government.

At the surveillance-state garrison known as the *Washington Post*, where cognitive dissonance must be something fierce right now, quickly out of the box was

conventional-wisdom columnist Dana Milbank, who portrayed Feinstein as a savvy and angelic force to be reckoned with. The adulatory logic was classic for journalists who like to conflate complicity with credibility.

Noting Feinstein's record as "an ally of Obama and a staunch defender of the administration during the controversy over the National Security Agency's surveillance programs," Milbank wrote: "So her credibility could not be questioned when she went public, reluctantly, to accuse Obama's CIA of illegal and unconstitutional actions: violating the separation of powers by searching the committee's computers and intimidating congressional staffers with bogus legal threats."

News media accounts are filled with such statements right now. On the surface, they make sense – but there's a pernicious undertow. With the underlying logic, the only time we could become sure that Wall Street malfeasance was a real problem would be if someone with the stature of Bernie Madoff stepped up to condemn it in no uncertain terms.

History tells us that we'd be deluded to depend on entrenched elites to opt for principle rather than continuity of the status quo. With few exceptions, what bonds those at peaks of power routinely trumps what divides them. It takes a massive and sustained uproar to really fracture the perversity of elite cohesion.

Consider the fact that the CIA, under the current Democratic administration, has gone to extraordinary lengths to transgress against a CIA-friendly Democratic-controlled Senate Intelligence Committee, in an effort to prevent anyone from being held accountable for crimes of torture committed under and by the Republican Bush administration.

While Dianne Feinstein has a long and putrid record as an enemy of civil liberties, transparency and accountability, it's also true that thieves sometimes fall out – and so do violators of the most basic democratic safeguards in the Bill of Rights.

Some powerful "intelligence" scoundrels are now at each other's throats, even while continuing to brandish daggers at the heart of democracy with their contempt for such ideals as a free press, privacy and due process. The responsibility for all this goes to the very top: President Barack Obama.

**Norman Solomon is co-founder of [RootsAction.org](http://RootsAction.org) and founding director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. His books include *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*. Information about the documentary based on the book is at [www.WarMadeEasyTheMovie.org](http://www.WarMadeEasyTheMovie.org).**



