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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Correcting the Hayden Record

Why did the CIA Director feed the "Bush lied" myth?

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So what should we think of a senior official who knocks his own Administration to win easy Senate confirmation, apologizes profusely in private and promises to correct the record, and then fails to follow through on his promise?

That's the behavior of newly minted CIA Director Michael Hayden, who has done the Bush Administration a huge disservice by reinforcing the Democrats' "Bush lied" theme in his confirmation testimony. At his Senate hearing last month, General Hayden told Michigan Democrat Carl Levin not once but twice that he was not "comfortable" with intelligence-related work that had been done by an office reporting to former Undersecretary of Defense Doug Feith. He also suggested such work had been "wrong," "inaccurate," and "misleading."

As General Hayden would have known all too well, Mr. Feith's office has been an obsession of Senator Levin, who contends despite all evidence that mistakes on Iraq intelligence were all the fault of civilian appointees at the Pentagon. The truth, as a bipartisan report from his own committee attests, is that the CIA made most of the errors on its own.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Feith called General Hayden to object to his testimony. And, according to Mr. Feith, General Hayden was apologetic. He said he had not intended to say what he appeared to, and promised to issue a statement correcting the record. Arizona Senator Jon Kyl tells us he had a similar conversation with General Hayden, during which the CIA director promised a remedial letter that could be entered into the Congressional record. "He told us he did not intend those remarks to suggest Doug Feith or the Department of Defense did anything wrong, inaccurate or misleading. That is precisely what he told me," says Mr. Kyl.

But the General's subsequent effort, provided to us by Mr. Kyl, is no retraction or correction at all. It says only that his concern about bad intelligence methodology "is not confined to any specific program." Both Mr. Feith and the Senator have asked Mr. Hayden to be more specific, but so far to no avail. Mr. Hayden also declined to comment for this editorial.

Let's be clear that while the CIA director apparently insists he was offering a generic statement on intelligence craft, he was not asked a generic question. Here's the exchange:

Senator Levin: "While the intelligence community was consistently dubious about links between Iraq and al Qaeda, Mr. Feith produced an alternative analysis, asserting that there was a strong connection. Were you comfortable with Mr. Feith's office's approach to intelligence analysis?"

General Hayden: "No, sir, I wasn't . . . No, sir, I wasn't comfortable."

Mr. Levin: ". . . well, what were you uncomfortable about?"

General Hayden: "Well, there were a couple of things." He then went on to suggest that, in the case of al Qaeda links to Iraq, the Pentagon had somehow become too "laser beam focused" and had not recognized "left-and-right-hand boundaries," whatever in the world that meant. And the General added, "That would be very wrong. That would be inaccurate. That would be misleading."

These and other similar remarks obviously pleased the likes of Senator Levin, who cited them specifically in justifying his vote for confirmation, and led other Democrats to back General Hayden in the 78-15 confirmation vote. But the remarks also fed an antiwar Democratic mythology evident in the fallacious premise of Senator Levin's question.

Mr. Feith's office did not freelance an "alternative analysis." Much of the work it did on the Iraq-al Qaeda connection was a response to a question for the record posed by the Senate Intelligence Committee itself. Nor did the Defense Department "assert" a "strong connection." Judging by leaked excerpts of the still highly classified work printed in the Weekly Standard, DOD merely provided the committee with a list of raw intelligence items on the topic.

The issue here is bigger than the credibility of General Hayden, or of Mr. Feith. Senator Levin has been pushing the Senate Intelligence Committee to publish a report, before this November's election, that would accuse Bush officials of misusing intelligence to push the country into war. General Hayden has played into the Senator's highly partisan, and historically inaccurate, hands. We can understand why the General is reluctant to take back his testimony at this stage and risk offending Mr. Levin, who can make life miserable for the CIA chief. But the General also has an obligation to the truth and to the President who appointed him.

His testimony, along with his subsequent failure to follow through on promises to correct the record, do not make for an auspicious, truth-telling start at CIA.

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