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Obama's Counterterror Czar Gave Bogus Intel to Bush White House

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President Obama's counterterrorism adviser, John Brennan, is the White House point man for the war on al-Qaida and its affiliates. He's the key official coordinating the administration's "targeted killing" of suspected terrorists with air strikes launched from drones flying over Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. But Brennan is carrying around some unpleasant baggage that has remained a secret.

As head of the multi-agency Terrorist Threat Integration Center in 2003 and 2004, Brennan disseminated to the Bush White House a stream of CIA intelligence from a bogus source, former CIA officials say. Ridiculed by some with the CIA, the bogus intelligence nevertheless led to disruption in the U.S. and abroad, including an orange terror alert and the cancellation of dozens of international flights.

An Obama administration official does not dispute that Brennan distributed the intelligence during the Bush era but said Brennan passed it along because that was his job.

Brennan's role has never been previously disclosed, though it has previously been reported that the bogus CIA intelligence was generated by a computer software contractor based in Nevada. The contracting company claimed to intercept al-Qaida targeting information encrypted in the broadcasts of TV news network Al Jazeera. In reality, experts later said, the broadcasts contained no such information.

At the CIA, the information was controversial from the beginning, and many agency officials said at the time that it should not have been distributed. Jose Rodriguez, who was directing the CIA's Counterterrorism Center, said the CTC viewed the intelligence as "crazy."

"We were very skeptical," Rodriguez recalled.

Other former CIA officials said the information was confirmed as fake within months. It eventually became the intelligence community's version of a scandal: unknown to outsiders, but an embarrassment at the CIA.

Yet the Bush administration used the intelligence to justify the December 2003 orange alert and the cancellation of dozens of international flights. Rodriguez and another former CIA official said that the reason the intelligence had impact was that Brennan pushed it all the way to the White House.

"It was briefed by John. He was the guy who was bringing it there," said Rodriguez, who added that he believes Brennan was trying to build up his own profile. "My own view is he saw this, he took this, as a way to have relevance, to take something important to the White House."

Rodriguez is a controversial figure in his own right. After he became the director of the CIA's National Clandestine Service, he drew criticism for destroying tapes of a CIA interrogation site. This year, he published a book called "Hard Measures: How Aggressive CIA Actions After 9/11 Saved American Lives," which defends the CIA's "enhanced interrogation" program and criticizes the Obama administration for killing but rarely capturing terrorists.

He did not mention Brennan or the bogus intelligence in that book. But he says the incident was a major problem.

"Brennan was a major factor in keeping it alive," he says. "We thought it was ridiculous."

Another former CIA official, who asked that his name not be revealed, agreed that without Brennan, the intelligence wouldn't have had wide distribution.

"It was Brennan who decided to take this to the White House," he said. "We heard that Brennan took it upon himself to bring it to the White House."

Another former intelligence official also confirmed that Brennan pushed the information to the White House, even as intelligence officials back at the agency were convinced the information was a fraud.

Brennan declined a request for an interview for this story, but Tommy Vietor, a spokesman for Obama's National Security Council, conceded that Brennan had passed on the information, since he was the head of the TTIC, but Vietor said Brennan was not central to the incident.

"Your story is completely wrong," he said.

Vietor said Brennan didn't believe the information himself but had simply passed on information that the CIA had developed.

"It is absolutely wrong to say Mr. Brennan believed in the veracity of the information," he said.

A senior intelligence official who was involved in the issue pointed out that tensions were high in the wake of 9/11.

"It is really important to remember the context of this event," the official said. "The trauma of 9/11 was very fresh, and the potential threat information surfaced during one of the busiest travel times of the year. Treating the information as potentially credible before determining otherwise was absolutely the only responsible approach."

The Terrorist Threat Integration Center was renamed the National Counter Terrorism Center in 2004. Brennan left government in 2005 and led a contracting firm that specialized in threat analysis until he became a key counterterrorism adviser to Obama.

Brennan now is a powerful figure in Obama's counterterrorism efforts and has received glowing reviews from his colleagues. One, quoted in the New York Times, said Brennan was like "a priest with extremely strong moral values who was suddenly charged with leading a war."

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