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Sent: Friday, June 1, 2012 11:37 PM
To: H
Cc: Sullivan, Jacob J
Subject: CNN

Obj:

Loose lips and the Obama national security ship

Posted at 7:09 pm by: By CNN's Adam Levine

By Adam Levine, with reporting from Pam Benson and Ann Colwell

The level of detail spilling out through media reports about crucial national security operations is raising the question of whether President Barack Obama's administration can keep a secret — or in some cases even wants to.

In just the past week, two tell-all articles about Obama's leadership as commander-in-chief have been published, dripping with insider details about his sleeves-rolled-up involvement in choosing terrorist targets for drone strikes and revelations about his amped-up cyber war on Iran.

Each article notes the reporters spoke to "current and former" American officials and presidential advisers, as well as sources from other countries.

"This is unbelievable ... absolutely stunning," a former senior intelligence official said about the level of detail contained in the cyberattack story.

The official noted that the article cited participants in sensitive White House meetings who then told the reporter about top secret discussions. The article "talks about President Obama giving direction for a cyberweapons attack during a time of peace against a United Nations member state."

The article follows on the heels of what many considered dangerous leaking of details about a mole who helped foil a plot by al Qaeda in Yemen. The revelations of the British national threatened what was described at the time as an ongoing operation.

"The leak really did endanger sources and methods," Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-California and chair of the Intelligence Committee, told Fox News.

The Yemen plot had many intelligence and national security officials flummoxed and angered by its public airing. Despite that, a senior administration official then briefed network counterterrorism analysts, including CNN's Frances Townsend, about parts of the operation.

But such briefings are an "obligation" for the administration once a story like the Yemen plot is publicized, insisted National Security Council spokesman Tommy Vietor.

"The reason that we brief former counterterrorism officials is because they are extremely conscientious about working with us about what can and cannot be said or disclosed," Vietor told Security Clearance. "They understand that there is an obligation for the U.S. to be transparent with American people about potential threats but will work with us to protect operational equities because they've walked in our shoes."

Subsequently, the intelligence committee initiated a review of its agencies to assess the leak. The FBI launched an investigation as well.

Perhaps the highest profile intelligence coupe for the administration, the killing of Osama bin Laden, was followed almost immediately by criticism of how much detail was leaking out. Then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates complained that after officials agreed in the Situation Room not to reveal operational details, it was mere hours before that agreement was broken.

"The leaks that followed the successful bin Laden mission led to the arrest of Pakistanis and put in danger the mission's heroes and their families," Rep. Peter King, R-New York, said in an interview on CNN's "Erin Burnett OutFront."

Questions were raised about why details of documents and other articles that were seized during the raid were discussed even before the intelligence community had time to review what they were holding.

Leon Panetta, who at the time was the director of the CIA and is now the defense secretary, penned a letter to CIA staff warning against loose lips.

In the letter, obtained by CNN, Panetta wrote that the operation, "led to an unprecedented amount of very sensitive — in fact, classified — information making its way into the press."

"Disclosure of classified information to anyone not cleared for it — reporters, friends, colleagues in the private sector or other agencies, former agency officers — does tremendous damage to our work. At worst, leaks endanger lives," the letter said.

In the latest case, the White House denied it was orchestrating the leak. Asked Friday if the Times' story detailing the cyberattack on Iran was an "authorized leak," White House spokesman Josh Earnest disagreed "in the strongest possible terms."

"That information is classified for a reason. Publicizing it would pose a threat to our national security," Earnest told reporters.

But the White House has tried to be more open about what have been secretive programs. The president himself became the first administration official to acknowledge U.S. drones were conducting attacks in Pakistan when he made a comment to a supporter in an online chat, even though officials through all the years of the program had never said publicly they were being conducted.

Then, in April, the president's assistant for homeland security and counterterrorism, John Brennan, publicly blew the cover off the drone program, saying in a speech that "yes, in full accordance with the law — and in order to prevent terrorist attacks on the United States and to save American lives — the United States government conducts targeted strikes against specific al Qaeda terrorists, sometimes using remotely piloted aircraft, often referred to publicly as drones."

But that speech, Vietor told CNN's Security Clearance last month, was carefully considered for how revealing it could be.

"I'm not going to get into internal deliberations, but as a general matter we obviously push to be as transparent as we can while being mindful of our national security equities," Vietor said.