The Breeze

Patrick Haggerty's
"The Passing of a Giant"

September 8, 2009 • By Patrick Haggerty, Contributing Writer

We gather here today to honor the passing of a giant, and I’m not talking about Ted Kennedy. The CIA as we knew it has ceased to exist. When Leon Panetta was named the director of the agency, I thought he would destroy it through sheer ineptitude. It turns out I was very wrong.

Last month there was a reported heated exchange between Panetta and the White House Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel. It seems that Panetta was in an epic battle over the administration’s desire to sacrifice the CIA to foreign interests regardless what the president might have said just a few months before in a speech at the agency.

Perhaps left to his own devices, Panetta would have redirected the organization, but now that Attorney General Eric Holder has opened the gates to prosecute agents who performed “enhanced interrogation techniques” he may as well put a sign on the front doors of Langley saying “Sorry, We’re Closed.”

The CIA has existed since World War II. It was under the name of the Office of Strategic Services, but its job was the same: to protect America from those who would wish to do us harm. Since then, the agency has come under increasing fire by the legislative and executive branches. Once congressional oversight was placed on the agency’s activities in the early 1990s, the CIA’s ability to conduct covert operations was severely hampered.

But what the agency never relinquished were the interrogations of people considered threats to America or who had committed acts against us. After 9/11, interrogation became a top priority at the agency, along with hunting down and capturing 9/11 conspirators, Taliban leaders and later al-Qaida operatives. Information had to be gathered faster and be more reliable so that our troops could act decisively. The techniques used to gain this important and timely information had to be effective. Methods like waterboarding (simulated drowning), threats to family and outright lying — regardless of their moral standing — proved to have excellent results for the agency. And now that work to help protect our country is going to be criminalized?

Making this situation even worse is that the White House, along with the FBI, will now be in charge of all interrogations of “high value” detainees. This centralization of
an important CIA program shows that the president is not interested in making sure our troops in Iraq or Afghanistan are better armed with information, he is interested in appeasing foreign leaders and groups like Amnesty International. It is this disregard for American interests that has made me question president Obama’s judgment and the judgment of those advising him. By apologizing for activities that support our country’s soldiers, the president makes himself appear to be weaker, and by proxy, our country appears weak.

So what are the consequences for the CIA? Recruitment, already an issue in critical foreign languages like Chinese and Arabic, will decrease severely. Who would want to work for an organization where you could be prosecuted for doing your job? And Panetta, who has stood behind the agency’s activities, is now essentially a lame duck. Obama set him up to do nothing but strip the organization Panetta was in charge of from under his feet. This follows Obama’s drive to centralize power to the White House and away from the public.

The president needs to rethink these investigations. The fact that he has gone back and forth on this issue since his inauguration shows that even he doesn’t know what to do. But letting Eric Holder investigate actions he is not even authorized to see is foolish. The men and women who work to protect our country are under fire by the very man they serve.

After almost eight years without a major attack on U.S. soil, this administration is throwing away an asset that worked in hopes of appeasing forces outside our borders. History was not kind to Neville Chamberlain’s attempt to appease 1930s Germany. By neutering the CIA, will Obama face the same fate?

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Patrick Haggerty was a senior International Affairs major when he wrote "The Passing of a Giant."