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White House and ex-intelligence chiefs push torture veteran as CIA director

With a public nomination hearing scheduled today before the Senate Intelligence Committee, supporters of Gina Haspel as the next director of the US Central Intelligence Agency have begun advancing the argument that concerns about her role in the agency's torture program are outweighed by her record in running anti-Russia operations.

Haspel appeared on Capitol Hill Monday for a series of meetings with US Senators, particularly Democrats, whose votes on her nomination are believed to be in play. Among them was West Virginia's Joe Manchin, who has joined with Republicans in supporting previous Trump nominees, and Dianne Feinstein of California, the former Democratic chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, who previously said she had discussed the torture issue with Haspel and praised her performance as CIA deputy director.

Last week, Haspel reportedly offered to withdraw her nomination over concerns that the Trump administration was not going to assure her unqualified support after it became aware of chat logs from a CIA instant messaging system that reportedly exposed Haspel's enthusiastic support for the torture program initiated by the agency in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks.

During that period, Haspel took charge of a CIA "black site" in Thailand known as "Cat's Eye," where Abu Zubaydah and Abd el-Rahim al-Nashiri were taken after being kidnapped by CIA operatives. Both men were waterboarded at the site—Zubaydah 83 times—and were subjected to sleep deprivation, confinement in small boxes and being

repeatedly slammed into a wall. The torture left both of them severely damaged, both psychologically and physically, while producing no known intelligence.

In addition to overseeing the torture in Thailand, Haspel played a key role in the decision to shred videotapes made of the torture sessions, which was ordered by her then-superior, Jose Rodriguez, the director of the National Clandestine Service in 2005.

CNN reported that the White House dispatched several officials, including Marc Short, its legislative director, and press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders to CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia last Friday to assure Haspel that the administration would back her.

Opposition to Haspel's nomination from Senate Democrats has been muted. Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer has indicated that he would not call for Democrats to vote against her confirmation. Leading Democrats in the Senate have objected more to the process of the nomination, in particular the CIA's refusal to release public information on Haspel's 33-year career with the agency and its PR campaign on her behalf, which has included anecdotes about her aid to Mother Teresa and love of country singer Johnny Cash and the University of Kentucky basketball team.

Leading Democrats, including House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and former Senate intelligence panel chief Dianne Feinstein are themselves deeply implicated in the torture issue, having received detailed classified briefings on the methods being employed at the CIA as they were being carried out at the black sites without raising any objections or revealing these crimes to the American people.

The nomination has nonetheless generated sharp tensions within the US military and intelligence apparatus. Former CIA directors from both Democratic and Republican administrations have issued public statements backing Haspel. John Brennan, who was appointed director under the Obama administration, praised Haspel's "experience, the breadth and depth on intelligence issues." Leon Panetta, who served as both CIA director and defense secretary under Obama, has reportedly been lobbying Senate Democrats to back the nomination.

Meanwhile, a group of 109 retired US generals and admirals directed a letter to the Senate opposing her, in which they said they were "deeply troubled by the prospect of someone who appears to have been intimately involved in torture being elevated to one of the most important positions of leadership in the intelligence community." The letter added: "We do not accept efforts to excuse her actions relating to torture and other unlawful abuse of detainees by offering that she was 'just following orders,'" i.e., the defense offered by the Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg.

Trump has tweeted his support for Haspel, stating on Monday that “in these very dangerous times, we have the most qualified person, a woman, who Democrats want out because she is too tough on terror.” He repeated the “tough on terror” theme on Tuesday, adding that “The CIA wants her to lead them into America’s bright and glorious future.”

For its part, the top echelons of the CIA back Haspel, one of the few career intelligence officers to ever be tapped for director, as a means of asserting the agency’s autonomy and avoiding Trump’s installation of a political appointee.

The run-up to today’s hearing has seen a concerted campaign within the corporate media to promote Haspel’s nomination.

This has included appeals to identity politics, touting the nomination of Haspel as a victory for women. This found crude expression in an opinion piece published by the *Washington Post*, by a former female CIA agent who gushed that “With the nomination of Gina Haspel to be the next director of the CIA, the #MeToo and #TimesUp movement may have arrived at the CIA.”

Other columnists, however, have been more concerned about not allowing torture and other crimes carried out by Haspel and her colleagues in the past impeding preparations by the agency known as “Murder, Inc.” from preparing even greater crimes.

Under the headline “Gina Haspel is the rare CIA director nominee that both parties should love,” Jeremy Bash, a former CIA chief of staff and Democratic Party operative, dismissed the torture question in a piece written for NBC News.

“The waterboarding of Al Qaeda detainees in 2002 and 2003 is indelibly part of our nation’s past, and we cannot escape it. But it is not part of our future,” he wrote.

“Our future will pivot on our ability to confront the challenges posed by Russia, China, North Korea, Iran and the ever-changing tactics of terrorists all over the world,” Bash continued. “All of these challenges require intelligence professionals willing to step forward, serve and give our nation’s leaders their best and most candid advice. We need more people like Gina Haspel.”

Even more explicit along these lines was a column by the *Washington Post*’s David Ignatius, who enjoys close ties to the US intelligence apparatus, titled “Gina Haspel is tainted by her torture involvement. But she understands Russia.”

Ignatius states that Haspel “is probably the senior intelligence officer who best understands the Russian threat” and that rather than running a torture center in Thailand, her “Russia experience is the most important detail in her biography.” He cites fellow CIA agents as stating that Haspel “ran operations against Russians in several postings.”

Calling attention to Haspel's posting as CIA's London station chief from 2014 to 2017, Ignatius writes that she forged "a strong relationship with MI6, Britain's spy service." He goes on to write that she collaborated closely with the British agency in staging the international provocation over unsubstantiated allegations of Russia's involvement in the alleged poisoning of the ex-Russian-British double agent Sergei Skripal in Salisbury, England in March. He reports that as CIA deputy director, Haspel "personally briefed Trump about the case—and recommended the expulsion of 60 Russian spies as punishment. Trump went along, in the toughest action against Russia of his presidency." The thrust of Ignatius' argument, pitched in large measure to a Democratic Party establishment, which has centered its fire against Trump on allegations of "Russian meddling" and a policy that is supposedly too soft on Moscow, is that Haspel is uniquely qualified to guide the US intelligence agency in preparing provocations against and ultimately a military confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia.