



Lawmaker won't deny secret CIA program was 'Cheney assassination ring'

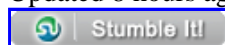


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By [David Edwards and Ron Brynaert](#)

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Early Friday morning, MSNBC followed up on a theory posted Thursday on the Huffington Post which alleged

that a secret CIA program shut down in June by director Leon Panetta could have been related to a purported effort led by Vice President Dick Cheney to assassinate intelligence targets abroad.

This past March, [as RAW STORY reported](#), investigative reporter Seymour Hersh dropped a bombshell when he told an audience at the University of Minnesota that the Bush Administration was running an “executive assassination ring” which reported directly to former Vice President Dick Cheney.

“It’s an executive assassination ring essentially, and it’s been going on and on and on,” Hersh stated. “Under President Bush’s authority, they’ve been going into countries, not talking to the ambassador or the CIA station chief, and finding people on a list and executing them and leaving. That’s been going on, in the name of all of us.”

“The revelation from seven Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee that they were misled about a critical CIA program has sparked a debate that touches on the most sensitive areas of national security policy,” [Huffington Post’s Sam Stein wondered aloud Thursday](#). “What program, exactly, was being kept secret?”

Panetta admitted that the CIA had been “concealing significant actions” from Congress since 2001.

Stein wrote that one “theory being bandied about concerns an ‘executive assassination ring’ that was allegedly set up and answered to former Vice President Dick Cheney,” though his article didn’t cite sources for the claim. The reporter spoke to Rep. Anna Eshoo, (D-Calif.), a signatory to the CIA letter, about the theory.

Asked if this was the basis of her letter to Panetta, Eshoo said she could not discuss what was a “highly classified program.” She did, however, note that when Panetta told House Intelligence Committee members what it was that had been kept secret, “the whole committee was stunned, even Republicans.” A Republican committee member [told Who Runs Gov’s Greg Sargent](#) it was something they hadn’t heard before.

MSNBC took another shot at asking Eshoo about it on Friday morning.

After correspondent Contessa Brewer summed up the “Cheney assassination ring” backstory, MSNBC anchor Dylan Ratigan remarked, “That’s one of those ‘it’s horrifying and not surprising’ in the same sentence for a lot of folks I know.”

Ratigan asked Eshoo, “Can you comment at all on Contessa’s report about a possible private army reporting to Dick Cheney being the thing about which you and others were misled?”

“No, I can’t,” Eshoo responded, “it’s highly classified and I can’t discuss it.”

Ratigan shot back, “Right, cause my theory is we were about to invade Canada, we were going to pick up St. Bart’s from the French, or Cheney had a private army.”

Eshoo kept firm, and wouldn’t divulge details about the program. She did, however, drop some clues.

Some of my colleagues have, in many ways, pooh-poohed it and said it wasn’t this and it wasn’t that. I believe that’s a complete mischaracterization of what director Leon Panetta informed the committee.

Now, I give him credit for coming up to the Hill the day after he was informed about this program. I also think it’s quite curious that his own people didn’t brief him when he first became director after he was confirmed.

....

But what I can tell you is that people were instructed not to inform the Congress. Now, that’s in direct violation of the law. The National Security Act... When the committee was informed by Director Panetta, everyone was stunned across the board, Republicans and Democrats. As well as we should be in terms of having something absolutely concealed from all members of Congress. The top leadership of the Congress didn’t know. So this is serious.

A report in Friday's Washington Post, however, seemed to throw water on the "secret CIA program may be an assassination ring" theory.

[Paul Kane and Ben Pershing penned:](#)

The program remains classified, and those knowledgeable about it would describe it only vaguely yesterday. Several current and former administration officials called it an "on-again, off-again" attempt to create a new intelligence capability and said it was related to the collection of information on suspected terrorists that was instituted after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Congressional Republicans said no briefing about the program was required because it was not a major tool used against al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. They accused Democrats of using the matter to divert attention away from Pelosi's accusation that CIA officials intentionally misled her in 2002 about the agency's interrogations of suspected terrorists.

But Democrats waved away such claims and said they may open a congressional investigation of the concealment of the program.

"Current and former administration officials familiar with the program said it was not directly related to previously disclosed high-priority programs such as detainee interrogations or the warrantless surveillance of suspected terrorists on U.S. soil," the Post reporters added. "It was a intelligence-collection activity run by the CIA's Counterterrorism Center, officials said. It was not a covert action, which by law would have required a presidential finding and a report to Congress."

A "former top Bush administration official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the classified nature of the issue," told the Post, "This characterization of something that began in 2001 and continued uninterrupted for eight years is just wrong. Honest men would question that characterization. It was more off and on."

The paper adds, "The official said he was certain that, if the nature of the program could be revealed, it would be seen as 'no big deal.'"

Another report out late Thursday also seemed to rule out the "Cheney's private army" theory.

[Newsweek reports](#) that "Panetta has ordered an internal inquiry into the agency's handling of a contentious and still highly classified intelligence program that has caused a heated dispute between the CIA and Democrats on the House intelligence committee. The move by Panetta appears to be an implicit acknowledgment by the agency that it should have disclosed information about the post-9/11 secret program to Congress much earlier than it did."

More from Newsweek:

One question Congressional Democrats still want answered: was the program an idea CIA officials had just talked about as a possibility, or had they actually put it into operation? If it was just talk, as some in the intelligence community insist, the argument could be made that there was no requirement to notify Congress. "This program came in post-9/11, and it was indeed on-again, off-again," the official said. "You could argue that it never really took shape." The implication is that whatever the details of the program, it carried risks that some officials at the agency strongly felt might not be worth taking.

"You've got a lot of people [at the agency] who, after September 11, were thinking of creative ways of doing things," said one former senior CIA official. "That doesn't mean you have to run up and tell Congress about it."

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Three officials familiar with still-secret details of the dispute said Panetta was not himself complicit in authorizing or covering up the program. One of the officials described the CIA director as a good guy for having voluntarily informed Congress about the information. Two officials also said there was no reason to believe that information about the secret program was about to come out in the

media; rather, they give Panetta credit for finding out about it and quickly reporting what he knew to the Hill.

This video is from MSNBC's *Morning Meeting*, broadcast July 9, 2009.



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