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Obama and the CIA—who runs Washington?

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The arrests, raids, apartment searches and discussions about a wider spy ring taking place in Berlin recall the Cold War novels of John le Carré, chronicling the period in which the city was a covert battleground between the KGB, on the one hand, and the US, British and German intelligence services on the other.

Today, however, the objects of German police and intelligence operations are not Soviet spies, but American ones. An employee of the BND, the country's main intelligence agency, has been arrested for passing hundreds of classified documents to the CIA, and a functionary at the defense ministry is under investigation. Other arrests may be forthcoming.

The seriousness of the affair was underscored Thursday with Chancellor Angela Merkel's expulsion of the CIA's Berlin station chief, as well as by suggestions from German officials that Berlin may resume active spying on Washington, for the first time since the end of World War II. The episode marks the most serious crisis in US-German relations since fall of the Nazi regime, nearly 70 years ago.

Yet, we are told, President Barack Obama was entirely ignorant of US spying in Germany, not even told about the arrest the day after it had taken place, when he was conducting a telephone discussion with Chancellor Merkel.

While Obama and the CIA have both remained silent on the spying affair, the story of his ignorance was obviously leaked by the White House. It has provoked attacks from Republicans and some sections of the intelligence community for what they have described as “throwing the CIA under the bus.”

Obama’s motive for claiming he knew nothing are clear. The new US spy scandal in Germany comes one year after NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden released documents revealing that the US spy agency was continuously monitoring the electronic communications of millions of Germans. And it comes just nine months after it was exposed that among the many cellphones being tapped was that of Merkel herself.

Since then, the US administration has sought to smooth over the public furor over these revelations in Germany, while seeking to closely align Berlin with Washington’s aggression in Ukraine and elsewhere in the east and maintaining the closest collaboration with Germany’s intelligence service. The new revelations threaten to revive public animosity in Germany, even as growing sections of the country’s political establishment are calling for a more independent foreign policy to advance the distinct strategic interests of German imperialism.

The dilemma faced by Obama shares some essential features with that confronted by President Dwight D. Eisenhower 54 years ago, when a top secret U-2 spy plane piloted by Francis Gary Powers was shot down over the Soviet Union, creating a scandal that also cut across US foreign policy objectives.

With the May 1, 1960 downing of the U-2 coming on the eve of an East-West summit, the Eisenhower administration initially attempted—with humiliating results—to cover up the affair, claiming that the aircraft was a weather plane that had gone off course. The Soviets, however, had captured the pilot and were able to swiftly debunk the American alibi. At the same time, the Moscow bureaucracy, based on its policy of “peaceful coexistence” with US imperialism, took the position that the CIA and its politically powerful director, Allen Dulles, were solely to blame for the spy flight, and that Eisenhower himself was not responsible.

The silence of the White House on the affair led to criticism of Eisenhower on the floor of the Senate. Then-Democratic majority whip Mike Mansfield said that reports Eisenhower had no knowledge of the U-2 spying raised the question of “whether or not this administration has any real control over the federal bureaucracy.” The US press began sounding the same theme, criticizing the US president for failing to exercise control over the intelligence agency. Ten days after the downing of the plane, Eisenhower was compelled to make a public statement claiming responsibility for the spy program.

Several months later, Eisenhower was to deliver his farewell address, warning of the perils embodied in the growth of what he called the “military-industrial complex.” Its “acquisition of unwarranted influence,” he said, posed the danger of “the disastrous rise of misplaced power.”

Today, no one in Congress or the corporate media questions in regard to the German affair whether Obama exercises “any real control” over the US intelligence agencies, which, together with the military, have grown beyond anything that Eisenhower could have ever imagined.

Eisenhower's warning has been fully realized in the rise of a vast, secretive military-intelligence apparatus that wields the real power in Washington, while carrying out continuous and murderous violence, provocations and massive spying around the globe.

Nor, for that matter, does Obama feel any need to assert his dominance over the CIA, NSA and Pentagon. He has no separate interests from theirs, serving as their figurehead "commander-in-chief." His job is not to rein in the military and the intelligence agencies, but rather to provide them with public relations services, trying to convince the American and world public that wholesale spying, drone assassinations—whose targets he helps select at the White House's "terror Tuesdays"—and military massacres are all necessary instruments of the "war on terror," and in harmony with democratic rights and methods of rule.

Obama, who after graduating from college took his first job as an "analyst" for Business International Corporation, which provided intelligence dossiers for US corporations while serving as a front for covert CIA agents, personifies this military-intelligence complex. This is still the milieu in which he is most comfortable: the classified intelligence briefing and the review of secret dossiers.

The German spying episode has served to underscore both the terminal crisis of American democracy and the increasing inter-imperialist tensions that threaten—as they did twice in the 20th century—to give rise to a new world war.