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# Obama battles to contain CIA-Senate feud in wake of Feinstein accusations

CIA chief John Brennan rejects allegations that agency used intimidation to hide role in the torture of terrorism suspects

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[Dan Roberts](#) and [Spencer Ackerman](#) in Washington  
 theguardian.com, Tuesday 11 March 2014 18.37 EDT

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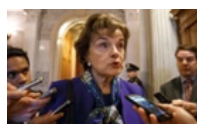

CIA director John Brennan said the allegations went 'beyond the scope of reason'. Photograph: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

The Obama administration was battling to contain a collapse in trust between the US intelligence services and Congress on Tuesday after a senator it counted as one of its most loyal supporters accused the CIA of a catalogue of cover-ups, intimidation and smears to hide its role in the torture of terrorism suspects.

The bombshell allegations by Dianne Feinstein, the chairwoman of the Senate intelligence committee, were

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batted away by CIA director John Brennan, who said they went "beyond the scope of reason". But they revealed growing strains at the heart of Washington's intelligence establishment about the agency's power and accountability.

[In a dramatic speech](#) on the floor of the US Senate, Feinstein accused the CIA of potentially violating the US constitution and of criminal activity in its attempts to obstruct her committee's investigations into the agency's use of torture in the aftermath of 9/11. She described the crisis as a "defining moment" for political oversight of the US intelligence service.

The White House sought to avoid taking sides in the dispute, saying Barack Obama was aware of the Senate claims but refused to comment on the substance of the allegations or say whether the president was concerned.

"This is a matter involving protocols established for the interaction between committee staff and the CIA," said spokesman Jay Carney. "There are periodic disputes about this process and it is under two separate investigations, so I am not going to provide an analysis of it."

But senior Senate Democrats continued to back Feinstein's unprecedented public attack, calling on the president to allow swift publication of an unclassified version of her committee's report into the CIA's interrogation activities. "I support Senator Feinstein unequivocally, and I am disappointed that the CIA is apparently unrepentant for what I understand they did," [Senate majority leader Harry Reid told reporters](#).

Senator Ron Wyden, a long-time critic of intelligence overreach, [told CNN](#): "The bottom line is: I am becoming convinced the CIA is simply fearful of the interrogation report being made public, and I think it's time for the American people to get that information."

The CIA is refusing to back down, raising the prospect of Obama being forced to choose whether to support his party or the intelligence community. "We are not in any way, shape or form trying to thwart this report," said Brennan at a speech at the Council on Foreign Relations. "As far the allegations of the CIA hacking into Senate computers are concerned, nothing could be further from the truth. We wouldn't do that; that's beyond the scope of reason."

Observers noted that Feinstein did not allege "hacking"

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but detailed an alleged unauthorised search of a computer system provided to Senate staff by intelligence officers. Beyond Brennan's general remarks, the CIA did not offer a detailed rebuttal of Feinstein's allegations.

"Brennan is up to his eyeballs in trouble," said Amy Zegart, co-director of the Center for International Security and Co-operation at Stanford University. "It's one thing to stonewall congressional intelligence staffers, quite another to be charged with spying on them for doing their jobs. For years, Feinstein has had the CIA's back. Now she's out for blood. How the CIA managed to turn one of its staunchest defenders into one of its fiercest critics is just mind boggling."

In her speech, Feinstein, who said she was making her statement "reluctantly", confirmed recent reports that the committee believed CIA officials had monitored on at least two occasions the computer networks used by Senate staffers working on the torture investigation. Going further than previously, she accused the CIA of revoking access to documents containing evidence of torture that would incriminate intelligence officers.

She also alleged that anonymous CIA officials were effectively conducting a smear campaign in the media to discredit and "intimidate" Senate staff by suggesting they had hacked into the agency's computers to obtain a separate, critical internal report on the detention and interrogation programme.

Staff working on the Senate investigation have been reported to the Department of Justice for possible criminal charges by a lawyer at the CIA who himself features heavily in the alleged interrogation abuses. The CIA's inspector general is conducting another inquiry into the issue.

Feinstein said the two investigations, launched at the behest of the CIA, amounted to an attempt at "intimidation". She revealed that CIA officials had also been reported to the Department of Justice for alleged violations of the fourth amendment and laws preventing them from domestic spying.

"This is a defining moment for the oversight role of our intelligence committee ... and whether we can be thwarted by those we oversee," said Feinstein in a special address on the floor of the the US Senate. "There is no legitimate reason to allege to the Justice Department that Senate staff may have committed a

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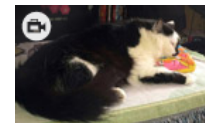
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crime ... this is plainly an attempt to intimidate these staff and I am not taking it lightly.”

Feinstein said that she would immediately appeal to the White House to declassify the report's major findings. The White House is formally on record supporting the declassification, which the president has the power to order.

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Dianne Feinstein leaves the Senate floor. Photograph: J. Scott Applewhite/AP

At the previously scheduled event reflecting on the first year in the job on Tuesday, Brennan rejected the accusation that the CIA had thwarted the Senate investigation, and denied the agency had inappropriately accessed Senate computers. “Nothing could be further from the truth. We wouldn’t do that,” he said. Brennan pointed out that he had referred the matter to the CIA inspector general, who was investigating, and would defer to his conclusions.

He also acknowledged there was a Justice Department investigation that encompassed the Senate committee staff members. “There are appropriate authorities are looking at what CIA officers and SSCI staff members did – and I defer to them as to whether there was any violation,” he said.

Brennan said the CIA wanted to put the issue of the torture programme, which he described by its agency nomenclature as “rendition, detention and interrogation”, behind it. “Even as we have learned from the past, we must also try to put the past behind us.” he said.

On the Senate floor earlier, Patrick Leahy, the chairman of the judiciary committee and the longest serving US senator, described Feinstein’s speech at the most important he had witnessed in his time in Congress.

“I cannot think of any speech by any member of any



party as important as the one the senator from California just gave," Leahy said.

Senator Mark Udall of Colorado, an intelligence committee member, said in a statement he applauded Feinstein for "setting the record straight today on the Senate floor about the CIA's actions to subvert congressional oversight".

He accused the CIA of "trying to hide the truth from the American people about this program" and said it had "illegally" searched the committee's computers.

One of the points at issue between the CIA and the Senate intelligence committee is the ownership of the Senate's investigation. In a recent court case seeking to prevent public release of the Senate's inquiry, the CIA argued that the inquiry was the exclusive property of the Senate.

A "key principle" in a 2009 accord between the intelligence agency and the Senate intelligence committee, was that committee staffers' work "would not become 'agency records'" and were the "property of the committee," CIA congressional liaison Neal Higgins [told](#) a court in February.

Higgins's statement took on new salience on Tuesday in the light of Feinstein's revelation that the CIA had searched the secure computer network it set up at a Virginia facility for the committee's classified use.

"This search involved not only a search of documents provided to the committee by the CIA, but also a search of the 'stand alone' and 'walled-off' committee network drive containing the committee's own internal work product and communications," said Feinstein, who said she considered the search an effort at "intimidation" to undermine the Senate committee's oversight responsibilities.

In Higgins's filing to deny the case, brought by the American Civil Liberties Union, he acknowledged that work by the committee "remain congressional records in their entirety". That meant they were not CIA records and could not be released under the Freedom of Information Act.

A member of the Senate committee, Ron Wyden of Oregon, cited Higgins's filing as contradicting the basis for what he called an "unprecedented invasion" of CIA computers.

"The CIA's own recent court filing makes clear that the

work product on these computers was and is 'the property of the committee'," Wyden said in a Tuesday statement. "I share [Feinstein's] concern that this search may have violated both federal law and the US constitution."

Both Brennan and his CIA deputy, Avril Haynes, are former White House staffers, trusted by President Obama. Brennan – who last week blasted senators on the committee for "[spurious allegations](#)" about his agency – batted away a question about his resignation. "If I did something wrong, I will go to the president, and I will explain to him exactly what I did, and what the findings were. And he is the one who can ask me to stay or to go," Brennan said.

*Additional reporting by Nora Biette-Timmons*



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**azythos**

11 March 2014 10:46pm


Good. Let the bastards eat each other and Obama, too! Let's lie back and watch the snake pit.



**jubbler** azythos

11 March 2014 11:44pm

Yes but while Congress fiddles the world burns. There are crises in Ukraine and South East Asia. Although the US is far from perfect it beats Russia or China on every metric. Like it or not, the free world needs the US to get it together, and soon.



**photosymbiont** jubbler

12 March 2014 12:34am

Congratulations on posting the most ill-informed and jingoistic comment of the week! It really provides a nice summation of the persistence of outdated Cold War logic in the 21st century, too. I suppose this is the perspective you get after being brainwashed by corporate media for most of your childhood and adult life.


In reality, we should be arguing for the independence and right to self-determination of all peoples all over the planet - and as members of the 'free world' we might want to focus on the dictatorial regimes the U.S. supports, such as Saudi Arabia, right? You know - slavery, torture, refusal to create a constitutional government, rampant corruption, financing terrorism, etc.?

Oh yes, China and Russia are not much better - but, as the whole NSA expose reveals, the U.S. has no more claim to being the 'free world' than China or Russia does - the governments of Britain and the U.S. would love to have something similar to China's control of the internet, would they not? Only public opposition prevents them from moving in that direction.

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**JinTexas**

11 March 2014 10:46pm

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