

Claim of secret CIA war denied

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By Daniel Dombey in Washington

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Aides from the administrations of both Barack Obama and George W. Bush defended themselves on Tuesday against claims that the Central Intelligence Agency broke the law by hiding a programme to assassinate al-Qaeda leaders.

The programme, revealed in the past few days, was halted only last month by Leon Panetta, CIA director.

Republicans reject claims that **Dick Cheney**, the former vice-president, kept the programme hidden from congressional scrutiny. The Obama administration is seeking to challenge any perception that it is hostile to the CIA or weak on the war against terrorism.

Elizabeth Cheney, Mr Cheney's daughter and a former state department official in her own right, told MSNBC, the cable news channel, there was no evidence that the former vice-president broke

the law. She said Democrats were not "up to handling national security" and added that the US had been "kept safe" for eight years.

Norman Ornstein of the **American Enterprise Institute**, a conservative think-tank, said: "The issue right now for Obama is how much he is going to focus back on what the Bush administration did in the name of preventing terrorist attacks. The more stories like this, the more pressure there is from liberal Democrats and the press to do an investigation."

Mr Ornstein added that the administration was opposed to such a course, because of the "serious downside" risk of "a breach in the country, irritating former president Bush, who has been remarkably supportive of Obama by not criticising him, and a distraction from Afghanistan and Pakistan".

A US intelligence official also sought to draw a line under the programme, arguing that Mr Panetta briefed Congress as soon as a CIA unit told him of the programme's existence. "This programme was on-again, off-again over the years and never went fully operational," the official said. "If press accounts of this programme are accurate, when did it become a sin to go after top terrorists?"

Underlining the pitfalls on all sides for the administration on the issue, congressional aides said Christopher Bond, the senior Republican on the Senate intelligence committee, had pressed Mr Panetta on why the programme had been cancelled. Mr Bond cited Mr Panetta in arguing that since the programme "was under existing legal authorities, there was no illegal or inappropriate activity by the CIA".

Indeed, the Obama administration has stepped up a programme of targeting al-Qaeda and the Taliban with Predator drones, which also have the aim of killing top leaders and are also operated by the CIA. But those strikes take place with implicit approval from Pakistan – and Congress has been briefed.

Representatives such as Anna Eshoo, a Democrat congresswoman from California, say the previous administration broke the terms of the National Security Act by not briefing adequately on the recently revealed programme.

Their stand comes as a relief to Nancy Pelosi, the House speaker, who in May was embroiled in a dispute with the CIA on whether the agency misled Congress about "waterboarding" in interrogations.

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