

US Justice Department witchhunt backfires
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A witchhunt orchestrated by George W Bush supporters against government lawyers representing Guantanamo inmates has backfired, as conservatives joined the outcry against the McCarthy-like attacks.

"Who are these government officials? Eric Holder would only name two. What's the secrecy behind the other seven? Whose values do they share?" asks the video ad posted online by the conservative group Keep America Safe.

"Tell Eric Holder the Americans have the right to know their identities, the Al-Qaeda Seven."

Liz Cheney, daughter of former vice president Dick Cheney, has come under fire from left and right for orchestrating the campaign questioning the patriotism and loyalty of Justice Department lawyers who represented terror suspects in private practice before they joined the agency.

The debate gained further steam in successive diatribes exchanged in rival editorials and commentaries, and in the press that warned of a witchhunt on the scale of senator Joe McCarthy's hounding of Communists at the height of the Cold War in the 1950s.

It all began during a November oversight hearing, when Republican Senator Chuck Grassley asked Attorney General Eric Holder to provide a list of Justice Department lawyers who may have represented terror suspects in the pasts and whether there might be any conflict of interests.

Some 700 US civilian and military lawyers have defended hundreds of the detainees held at the US naval prison in southern Cuba ever since the Supreme Court granted them that right in 2004.

Americans 'have a right to know'

After President Barack Obama was ushered into the White House, one of the attorneys, Neal Katyal, became the principal deputy solicitor general, who represents the federal government before the Supreme Court.

The high court handed Katyal a victory against the Bush administration in 2006 in a landmark ruling invalidating the administration's system to try the Guantanamo detainees.

Holder responded to Grassley last month, saying nine of his agency's lawyers had represented Guantanamo detainees during their private practice, and that they had not violated the Justice Department's ethics rules.

But Holder only gave two names: Katyal and former Human Rights Watch senior counsel Jennifer Daskal.

The Iowa Republican was not satisfied, insisting that "Americans have the right to know who advises the attorney general and the president on these critical matters."

Conservative lawmakers fueled the debate, but they were soon rebuked by 22 former top Republican judges and lawyers who blasted the accusations levied against the defense

attorneys as "unjust" and "shameful."

Even Kenneth Starr, who led the impeachment proceedings against then-president Bill Clinton in 1998, joined the group in rebuking Cheney.

Patriotism maligned

The 22 top lawyers said the attack "maligns the patriotism of people who have taken honorable positions on contested questions and demands a uniformity of background and view in government service from which no administration would benefit."

They cited John Adams, the second president of the United States and one of its founding fathers, who defended British soldiers arrested on criminal charges. Six of the eight soldiers were eventually acquitted.

"In our legal system, a client is not the lawyer, a client uses not the lawyer's views, a client can be most despicable, his cause may be disgusting, and worthy of criticism but the attorney's job is to represent him zealously in court," former Bush administration lawyer David Rivkin, one of the letter's signatories, told AFP.

"It's depressing McCarthyism," he added.

"They do that for political reasons. I understand it's a good way of slamming the administration, but it's wrong."

- AFP

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