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The Anonymous, Unthreatening Style of Gina Haspel, the New CIA Director

Gina Haspel wears outfits that say nothing and everything.

By **Eliza Brooke** | Updated May 17, 2018, 4:27pm EDT



Gina Haspel meets with lawmakers in Washington on Monday. | Photo: Alex Wong/Getty Images

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Who is [Gina Haspel](#)? Until recently, Haspel was anything but a household name, having worked, in her words, “undercover and in the shadows” for the CIA since 1985. In early May, she answered questions from the Senate Intelligence Committee during a [confirmation hearing](#) to become director of the CIA. On May 17, [Haspel was confirmed](#).

Many of the [questions](#) Haspel answered during the hearing focused on her oversight of a Bush-era “black site” in Thailand, where CIA operatives tortured suspected members of al-Qaeda by employing such techniques as waterboarding, sleep deprivation, throwing them against walls, and confinement in coffin-like wooden boxes. Haspel played a role in the decision to destroy videotapes of those interrogations in 2005 but said that she did not appear in them.

Thanks to her official appearances the week of her confirmation hearing, photos of Haspel were all over news sites. Her self-presentation, and her clothing especially, was simultaneously striking and unremarkable — and potentially impossible to analyze. Unlike figures like [President Trump](#) or [Hillary Clinton](#), whose sartorial choices have been documented publicly for decades, we had no context for Haspel’s style.

On May 7, Haspel wore a belted red-and-white floral dress to attend meetings on Capitol Hill. The look telegraphed femininity — a fitting thing to underscore, given that Haspel was to become the first female director of the CIA — and approachability, insofar as women are presumed to be nonthreatening. With her tidy shoulder-length brown hair and glasses, Haspel easily could have passed for a college professor on her way to teach a Chaucer seminar.



Haspel took meetings in Washington on Monday. | Photo: Alex Wong/Getty Images

An outfit like this doesn't square with what we know of Haspel's career — particularly her ties to torture — and yet has a diffusing effect on that glaring dissonance. (In her testimony later that week, Haspel said that she would not allow the CIA to begin another interrogation program that involves torture.) Still, it's hard to say for sure if that's what Haspel was aiming to accomplish.

“What we're seeing could just be her personal style,” says Lauren Rothman, a DC-based fashion consultant who often works with executives and politicians. “It could be that she's truly not intentionally using her clothing to tell a narrative.”

Haspel's style is notable in its perfect anonymity. At her hearing, Haspel dressed in a soft

khaki suit, a patterned scarf knotted at her neck. Rothman describes the look as “fairly inconspicuous,” especially in Washington, where pulling on a khaki suit when the weather warms is a standard move for politicians.



Gina Haspel testifies before the Senate Intelligence Committee on Wednesday. | Photo: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

The desire to appear unremarkable tracks with Haspel’s past as a CIA operative. As Jenn Williams, the deputy foreign and national security editor at Vox, put it on [Vox’s *Today, Explained*](#) podcast: “[Haspel] has kind of mousy brown hair. She looks like she could be your sixth grader’s principal. She looks just like a random lady who passes on the street and whose face you would forget within a minute. But that’s a good thing — if you’re in

clandestine operations, you do not want people to know your face. You want to blend in.”

Now that she’s in the public eye, however, Haspel has a different reason to look like everyone else: to win Americans’ trust. In her opening remarks today, she cast herself as an “Air Force brat” and a hard-working woman of the people.

“I don’t have any social media accounts,” Haspel said with a small smile. “But otherwise I think you will find me to be a typical middle-class American, one with a strong sense of right and wrong and one who loves this country.”