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The Enemy Within

A History of Espionage

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INTRODUCTION

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction

The common reading of Newton's 1687
'Law of Reciprocal Actions'

In 2001 the world was confronted with the most appalling terrorist attack to date. Islamic terrorists crashed two hijacked passenger jets into the 'Twin Towers' World Trade Center in New York City. Another hijacked jet slammed into the Pentagon in Washington, DC. A fourth flight came down in a Pennsylvanian field. It was a tragedy too big for words.

As the numbness of shock wore away, parallels were quickly drawn with the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. Considering the hundreds of billions of dollars the United States spends on defence each year, people wondered if anything more could have been done to prevent the attack. More pertinently, had any indication of an attack been given by the intelligence agencies? The answer was, unfortunately, yes.

Long before the attacks, America's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had warned that Saudi-born Osama bin Laden's network of Islamic jihadists were planning to attack the United States. On 4 December 1998, the CIA included an article in its *Presidential Daily Brief* describing how bin Laden and his cohorts were planning operations. The report claimed two members of a terror cell had made a dummy run of an attack at a New York airport, successfully evading security checks. More ominously, they reported that other members of bin Laden's network were receiving hijack training.[1] In 1999 more reports of possible bin Laden-sponsored attacks appeared, including a plot to blow up the FBI building in Washington, DC.[2] If all this was known before 11 September, why hadn't the CIA reacted more effectively?

A large part of the answer lies in the somewhat chequered history of the CIA. Although a Cold War invention, the CIA's roots began in

World War II, with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), which was established in 1942. OSS proved itself every bit as capable as the British secret services it worked alongside. For example, OSS agents discovered that Germany was secretly obtaining vital ball bearings from Sweden after the Allies had destroyed its factories. The United States was then able to put diplomatic pressure on Sweden to halt the sales. One of its biggest coups was the recruitment of the spy 'George Wood' – in fact Fritz Kolbe – an official in the German Foreign Office. Kolbe supplied thousands of documents and reported on the development of the V1 and V2 flying bombs and the Messerschmitt Me 262 jet fighter. In addition to espionage, OSS also set a precedent for US overseas covert intervention. Perhaps less wisely in the long term, OSS provided aid and training to Vietnamese communist leader Ho Chi Minh in the war against Japan, despite warnings not to do so by France and China.[3]

At the end of World War II, the OSS was disbanded amid allegations of its becoming an 'American Gestapo'.[4] However, recognising the need for such a service, President Truman ordered the creation of the CIA in 1947. 'The Company' – as CIA operatives refer to their agency – is independent of all other government agencies and performs a mixture of clandestine missions and espionage on behalf of the US president. In the course of its history it has become no stranger to scandals, the culmination of which hampered its performance in the lead up to the 11 September attacks.

The first major scandal came with the 1961 'Bay of Pigs' affair. The CIA trained and equipped an army of Cuban exiles to overthrow Fidel Castro's communist regime, which had come to power in 1959. The operation was a fiasco and brought down the CIA boss Allen Dulles. In retaliation, Castro invited the Soviets to deploy nuclear missiles in Cuba, which brought about the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Many believe that President Kennedy's handling of the 'Bay of Pigs' invasion – he would not authorize supporting air strikes – led to his assassination in 1963. There is a long held, but unsubstantiated, theory that the assassination was a mafia hit; crime bosses being unhappy at losing gambling and drug rackets in Havana.

After the involvement of ex-CIA agents in the 1972 Watergate break-ins and following a series of allegations against the agency, a Senate committee chaired by Senator Frank Church began investigating

the alleged abuses of law committed by US intelligence agencies. It was revealed that the CIA had made attempts to assassinate foreign leaders, including Patrice Lumumba of the Congo and Fidel Castro. These attempts included the use of a poisoned wetsuit and exploding cigars. After the findings were presented, in 1976 President Ford issued an Executive Order banning the assassination of foreign leaders. In the 1980s the CIA again came under fire, this time for its Central American covert action programmes, its association with drug-runners and for running a private war in Angola. Shaky morale reached its nadir when in the early 1990s CIA officer Aldrich Ames was convicted of spying for the Soviets.

At the end of the Cold War, the CIA found itself on unfamiliar ground. There were big financial and personnel cuts, and as the number of agents declined, so the missions they faced became more varied. Agents found themselves shifted from crisis to crisis – one minute in the Balkans, the next in Africa. Certain corners of the world, however, were not covered at all. When it came to the Middle East, the CIA had a major problem recruiting and found itself relying on allies like Saudi Arabia for intelligence. More fundamentally, there was a sense that everything the CIA touched was bound to become a scandal in the eyes of Congress and the media. The CIA became wary of undertaking missions without a complete paper trail leading back to Washington with good legal justification for its involvement. In short, the agency would not take risks at a time when risks probably should have been taken.

Following al-Qaeda's 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, the Clinton administration felt bin Laden could be taken out as a justifiable act of self-defence. The CIA had already been looking to kidnap bin Laden from his Afghan base and bring him to trial in the United States before the 1998 bombings. A CIA-backed tribal group began planning the operation and mapping out bin Laden's HQ. In 1997 there was a report of an ambush by tribesmen against bin Laden on a road near Kandahar, but the operation failed because of poor tactics on behalf of the ambushing party.[5]

When CIA Director George Tenet revealed that bin Laden was attending a gathering of up to 200 jihadists at a remote camp in Afghanistan, Clinton gave the green light to attack. Not willing to risk ground forces, on the evening of 20 August 1998, 75 Tomahawk cruise missiles were launched at the terrorist camp. At the same time, 13 more

Tomahawks were fired at the al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum which was thought to have links with al-Qaeda. An Egyptian agent had told the CIA that a soil sample from the vicinity of the plant had tested positive for a chemical related to the production of VX nerve gas. In the wake of the 1995 Tokyo subway Sarin attack, Washington feared bin Laden might be planning something similar.[6]

Although the United States had responded to the embassy bombings, the attacks fell short of their objectives. The Sudanese government invited journalists to visit the al-Shifa plant and were shown an apparently harmless facility. No independent evidence of the CIA's nerve gas claim could be found. Worse, bin Laden survived the American attack and was seen by many in the Arab world as a hero for having done so. In fact he was probably tipped off before the attack. To reach targets in Afghanistan, the cruise missiles had to pass through Pakistan airspace. US planners feared Pakistan might think the missiles had been fired by India and retaliate. After giving Pakistan advance notice of the attack, it appears that details were leaked to bin Laden's Taliban hosts by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISID) – then believed to be the Taliban's 'primary patron.'[7]

At home Clinton was accused of making the attacks to distract attention from the Monica Lewinsky scandal. The incident was known as the *Wag the Dog* slur – after the 1997 film about an American president who faked a war to divert attention from a domestic crisis. Although Clinton claimed not to be affected by the Lewinsky scandal and subsequent impeachment proceedings, he was in no position to start throwing his weight around in Afghanistan, risking more adverse publicity.

Several more key opportunities to assassinate bin Laden were passed up before 9/11. On 20 December 1998 the CIA reported that bin Laden would be spending the night in Kandahar. Although the field agents indicated bin Laden should be hit, there was a fear in Washington that innocent bystanders might be killed or wounded and that a mosque might be damaged. Fear of adverse publicity stayed America's hand. The CIA then received reports that bin Laden was at a camp in the Afghan desert south of Kandahar where the risk of collateral damage was minimal. CIA sources further reported that bin Laden would be in the camp on the morning of 11 February. The attack

was planned, but the mission called off. Other intelligence placed an official United Arab Emirates aircraft near to bin Laden's quarters. It was feared that an Emirati prince was with bin Laden – if the prince was killed in the attack, the United States might lose a valuable ally in the Persian Gulf. The attack was cancelled.

Finally, in May 1999 bin Laden's position was again reported. The cruise missiles were readied and the intelligence was considered as good as could be hoped for. Over the course of five days and nights the CIA received a number of detailed reports from different assets, each pinpointing bin Laden in Kandahar.[8] Again, America hesitated. Elsewhere that month, intelligence provided by the CIA had led to the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the NATO war with Serbia – a mistake the CIA blamed on 'systemic organization problems'.[9] With this in mind the government could not risk a second blunder so soon. After that, no more missions against bin Laden were attempted until after 2001.

In the same way that questions were asked about America's failing to act in light of intelligence warnings before 11 September, when suicide bombers attacked London in July 2005 questions were asked about whether Britain's secret services had in any way come up short. Shortly after the London 7/7 bombing, *The Times* carried an interview with Prince Turki, the outgoing Saudi ambassador and former head of Saudi Intelligence. He expressed frustration that Prime Minister Blair had 'repeatedly failed to tackle radical Muslims in his backyard'. It transpired that Saudi Arabia and Pakistan considered Britain 'soft and indecisive' in dealing with extremists. Prince Turki considered the British government's response to requests to crack down on extremists 'inadequate' and accused Whitehall departments of 'trying to pass the buck'.[10] The day after this article appeared, the government announced it had detained ten suspected radicals.

Prince Turki's criticisms were nothing compared to the slating the British government received about its 2002 'September Dossier'. Before going to war in Iraq, Prime Minister Tony Blair believed a case for it should be made to the British public. He took a gamble and authorized the publication of all the available intelligence assessments, which claimed:

- Iraq was producing chemical and biological agents that could be used in weapons.

- Some of these weapons were deployable within 45 minutes of an order to use them.
- Iraq had developed mobile laboratories for military use.
- Iraq had retained up to 20 Al Hussein missiles, which could be used to deliver conventional, chemical or biological warheads within a range of 404 miles (650km).
- Iraq was trying to import uranium from Africa in order to develop a nuclear weapon.

In the document, next to the 45-minute claim, was a map demonstrating the range of the Al Hussein missiles. Within range of these weapons were countries including Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Israel and also Cyprus – home to a British base. The text clearly suggested that British forces were just 45 minutes away from a chemical weapon attack. The importance of this intelligence was reinforced when Blair alluded to '45 minutes' four times in a speech on the dossier in the House of Commons. The message was obviously effective. On the day of the dossier's release, the front page of the London *Evening Standard* carried the headline, '45 MINUTES FROM ATTACK'. The following day, the biggest-selling UK tabloid, *The Sun*, carried the sensational headline: 'BRITS 45 MINS FROM DOOM'.

Early in June 2003, after British forces had been deployed in Iraq, a startling allegation was made about the 45-minute claim. BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan said that in the week prior to publication, the previously 'dull' Iraq dossier had been 'sexed up' by the inclusion of the 45-minute claim. Gilligan said this had happened on the instructions of the Prime Minister's Director of Communications and Strategy, Alastair Campbell. Gilligan said he based his allegation on claims made to him by 'one of the senior officials in charge of drawing up the dossier', but would not reveal his identity.

The source turned out to be Dr David Kelly, an expert in biological warfare at the Ministry of Defence and former weapons inspector for the United Nations in Iraq. In 2002 Dr Kelly was working for the Defence Intelligence Staff and, because of his expertise, was asked to proofread parts of the draft dossier being prepared by Britain's Joint Intelligence Committee. On 22 May 2003, Dr Kelly met Gilligan at London's Charing Cross Hotel. Speaking 'off-the-record' Dr Kelly told

Gilligan he had been concerned with the 45-minute claim and made the allegation about Campbell.

When the story went public, the government went on the offensive and pressed the BBC to reveal its source. On 30 June, Dr Kelly went to his manager at the MOD and reported his contact with Gilligan. He was given a formal warning for the unauthorized meeting with a journalist. The MOD then released a statement from which journalists were able to guess that Dr Kelly had been Gilligan's source. On 15 July he appeared as a witness before a committee at the House of Commons, scrutinising the Iraq war. The following day Dr Kelly gave more evidence to the Intelligence and Security Committee. On 17 July, Dr Kelly told his wife he was going for a walk. About a mile from his home he committed suicide. It was all very damaging for the government.

A committee was set up to get to the root of the dossier's claims. If officials had not sexed up the dossier, why had the intelligence been wrong?[11] Someone privy to the intelligence before the Iraq War was Robin Cook, a former Foreign Secretary under Blair. When questioned, he gave an excellent analysis of the problems of interpreting intelligence in the lead up to the war:

> ... often when you are told a piece of information you are left with very real doubts over why you are being told that information. Are you being told it to mislead you? Are you being told it by somebody who actually wants to be paid but may not actually turn out to be reliable; or is not somebody – as I think was the case with some of the Iraqi exiles pursuing their own political agenda – who wants you to hear what suits them? All these questions and motivation form very great difficulty over making your assessment of intelligence... In fairness to the intelligence community one should recognise that Iraq was an appallingly difficult intelligence target to break. We had very little access to human intelligence on the ground and no hope whatsoever of putting in Western agents.[12]

If, as Cook claimed, there had been no Western agents in Iraq, where did the 45-minute claim come from? Was the information from Iraqi dissidents, or was it false information deliberately planted by the Iraqis to mislead and deceive America and Britain? Apparently, the 45-minute claim was based on information received by the Secret Intelligence Service

in August 2002 from a single source described as 'an established, reliable and longstanding line of reporting'.[13] However, although consistent with other evidence about Iraq's military capabilities, there was no other evidence to back the claim. As the Americans had found over the al-Shifa bombing, acting on uncorroborated evidence is a recipe for disaster.

Nor did the British 'uranium from Africa' claim stand up to scrutiny. The CIA sent former US ambassador to Iraq, Joseph Wilson, to Niger to investigate claims that Iraqi officials had been trying to buy uranium. Wilson reported the claims were false and the United Nations declared the supporting documents were forgeries. In the British enquiry, it was implied that British intelligence knew of the American's findings, but ignored them.[14] Despite Wilson's verdict, President Bush also referred to the claim in his State of the Union address of 28 January 2003, saying: 'The British Government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.'

In light of the evidence provided, Wilson was surprised that Bush had made this claim. In an article for *The New York Times* on 6 July 2003, Wilson said he believed the intelligence related to Iraq's weapons programme had been twisted to exaggerate the threat from Saddam Hussein's regime. Following this allegation, America's Deputy National Security Advisor, Stephen Hadley, admitted he was at fault for not deleting this part of the speech. In return, it seems the White House wanted some measure of revenge against Wilson. Later in 2003 it appears that Vice-President Dick Cheney's chief aide, Lewis 'Scooter' Libby leaked to the press that Wilson's wife was CIA agent Valerie Plame. In the United States, revealing the identity of a CIA agent is a criminal offence and after a long investigation, in 2005, Libby was indicted by a grand jury.

No sooner had this scandal blown up than the media began to focus on so-called CIA 'torture-flights'. In a process known as 'extraordinary rendition' the CIA was accused of kidnapping and illegally transferring suspected Islamic terrorists to secret prisons – known as 'Black Sites' – in third-party countries for interrogation. Many of the countries, including Syria and Egypt, have been separately accused by the US of permitting torture during interrogation. Although the US denied it, the concern was that CIA prisoners were being handed over for torture, or simply made to 'disappear'.[15] Following the allegations, the European Union wrote to US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice expressing

misgivings over reports that CIA 'torture flights' had made stops in EU countries. Stronger condemnation came in a Council of Europe report of 24 January 2006. Led by the former Swiss mafia prosecutor, Dick Marty, the report claimed more than 100 terrorist suspects had been flown to prisons and tortured. Mr Marty also stressed it was unlikely the CIA had done so without the knowledge of European governments, or at least their intelligence services.[16]

But take heart. Such secret service scandals and bungles have been causing trouble since the time of Moses, if not before. In fact, spying is recognized as the oldest profession in the world after prostitution. Throughout history, spies have gained a particularly loathsome reputation as being treacherous and morally degenerate. It is a reputation well deserved, but as General Tommy Franks, the US commander in the 2003 Iraq War said: 'To get information, we have to marry the devil or at least employ him. You have to deal.'[17]

Many believe the United States came to rely too much on spy technology and not enough on human agents. Although America spent billions on intelligence gathering every year before September 11, just 20 per cent of the budget went to the agency responsible for espionage – the CIA. The rest was spent on aerial and satellite reconnaissance and on electronic eavesdropping. Although literally billions of private emails, telephone calls and faxes are intercepted and monitored every day, the technology has yet to prove itself as effective as a well placed spy when it comes to tracking an individual, half way round the world, hiding in a cave.

Writing 2,500 years ago, the Chinese philosopher-general Sun Tzû advised that 'knowledge of the enemy can only be obtained by other men.' If this is the case, and history suggests it is, the study of espionage must come out of the shadows. One should always know one's enemy. More so if it is an enemy within.