

In Spies We Trust: the story of western intelligence

Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones

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Bernard Porter

Britain and America came quite late to the spying game, but by the late 20th century had come to dominate it. It is this, I suppose, that justifies the subtitle of this book, which scarcely mentions other Western intelligence agencies except in a chapter at the end discussing a possible EU alternative to the current Anglo-American axis. The main title must be meant ironically. The overwhelming impression left by the book is of massive untrustworthiness. It's true, as Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones points out, that 'an intelligence agency can rarely publicise its successes, so to dwell on failings can be a distortion of the true record'; but even so, it's the negatives that stand out. Anglo-American intelligence agencies have failed to predict wars and uprisings, made international situations worse through their covert interventions (Iran in 1953 is the big example, but there are many others), abused human rights, broken everyone's laws, routinely spied on innocents, been penetrated by enemies as well as betrayed by their friends, and misled, even turned against, their own democracies. In their favour, signals intelligence probably shortened the Second World War, and covert propaganda may have helped bring down the Soviet Union (Jeffreys-Jones doesn't seem certain about this). The record is mixed, but it is far from reassuring. Hence the controversies these agencies so often stir up. (The current Edward Snowden affair – too late to be included in this book – isn't of course the first, or even the first of its kind.)

Another reason is the inherent unsavouriness of the whole activity, which invariably involves betrayals of trust. 'Spies have always been detested', writes Jeffreys-Jones at the end of this book; which has been generally true, especially, as it happens, in the cases of Britain and America. For most of the 19th century Britain based much of its sense of

national identity on the fact that it didn't need to resort to these vile French and Russian practices. Of course there were precedents for them in Britain too – this book takes them back to William the Conqueror – but precedents can't be regarded as a 'tradition' unless they are joined up. Anti-spy prejudice has been much more traditional; and not just, as Jeffreys-Jones implies, among the upper classes. (In fact, perhaps least among the upper classes, so long as they weren't expected to spy on each other.) That's partly why, when British governments have felt the need to spy on others, and on their own people, they have tried to keep the very fact of their doing so secret – SIS, MI5 and GCHQ didn't officially exist until 1989. By contrast, the CIA was set up by Congress, and has always been – formally at least – accountable to it. Britain came round to the same position eventually, but imperfectly, and only when forced to by the European Court of Human Rights.

In other ways, however, the British and American intelligence agencies have been remarkably similar. For decades they hired the same kinds of people: in Britain's case, upper-class public school and Oxbridge types; in America's, east coast private school and Ivy League. These social elites were concerned to protect their countries not only against foreign threats, but also against, as Jeffreys-Jones puts it, 'what they regarded as repugnant elements' – that is, socialists or black activists – 'in their own societies.' It is this that made them a potential danger to democracy, with the covert powers at their disposal. The American Ivy Leaguers also tended to be Anglophile. They got along – though not without friction – with their British counterparts, and pushed the case for US entry on the Allied side in the World Wars. (Some isolationist Americans smelled an 'Anglo-American Establishment' plot to lead them 'by the nose' into both wars.) The co-operation worked pretty well, during the Second World War in particular, until the Ivy Leaguers began to 'lose their grip' in the 1960s, in line with broad US demographic trends (WASPs down, Hispanics up), while the British spooks remained, on the whole, 'Old Boys'. It was then that the so-

called 'special' Anglo-American intelligence relationship started hitting the rocks – and not only because of 'class'.

The British Empire was one bone of contention, though less so in the 1950s and 1960s, when America thought it made a useful barrier to communism. Communism itself was another problem. The Americans were more agitated by it than the British, whose wiser advice was often rejected. In British Guiana, for example, Britain did not feel that the socialist PM-elect Cheddi Jagan posed much of a threat, but was persuaded by the Americans to oust him covertly in any case. There were rows over the exchange of information – Henry Kissinger once threatened to withdraw all intelligence co-operation with Britain if Edward Heath didn't keep him abreast of his European negotiations (Jeffreys-Jones calls this 'blackmail', and claims it has remained in the backs of British minds ever since) – and over both countries' trustworthiness in the light of treacheries like those of the 'Cambridge Three' (then Four, then Five), and Aldrich Ames. The relationship should have reached its nadir during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, which revealed, according to your point of view, either how poor both countries' intelligence was, or how it was manipulated by politicians for their own ends. The surprise is that, according to interviews cited here with leading – though unnamed – British intelligence personnel, the 'special' intelligence relationship still remains 'the star in their firmament'; and also, it seems, in that of successive British governments, who in return for crumbs of intelligence from the American table allow themselves to be 'held over a barrel' – 'not', as Jeffreys-Jones slyly puts it, 'the best posture from which to conduct a trusting relationship'.

Spying can have its good side. It can reassure. 'Ignorance breeds fear,' Jeffreys-Jones points out, 'and fear lies at the root of aggression.' In the 1950s, Eisenhower used CIA intelligence to quell the alarm that what he called the 'military-industrial complex' was whipping up, in its own interests, about the Soviet threat. Fifty years earlier Theodore Roosevelt had set his fledgling secret service to prevent America from 'falling into the hands of capitalist robber

barons.' Clearly that did not altogether succeed; and it is doubtful whether either the FBI or MI5 could be tasked with a similar duty today. (The last I heard on this from a senior intelligence officer – 'Chatham House rules' prevent me from naming him – is that the 'Anglo-American model of capitalism' is one of the institutions that MI5 exists to protect.) But it's an idea. Perhaps a banker-savvy MI5 could have forewarned us of our latest real national threat. The advantage of inter-agency co-operation – the main focus of this book – is that it allows assessments to be tested independently. In the Anglo-American relationship, at its best, each 'kept a watchful eye on the other, and that helped them to be vigilant' – and, one might add, more cautious – 'about actual and potential enemies.' They could also learn from one another, so long as they thought they had something to learn.

The arrogant British often didn't. Nor, more recently, have the Americans. Since the 1970s the US has built a huge lead in the field of surveillance technology (so that it no longer needed British ex-imperial listening stations, for example), and has become impatient of advice from anywhere. Ideology has also played a part: if you're a Neo-Con, there is no reason to double-check whether 'liberated' countries really do turn naturally to 'democracy'. It seems that in the early 2000s the British intelligence community raised serious doubts that Saddam Hussein had WMDs, which were disregarded by Bush and Blair because they didn't fit in with their presumptions.

America's problem after 2001 was not that it had no loyal intelligence allies, but that they were, as Jeffreys-Jones puts it, 'too loyal'. The UN's Hans Blix, who resisted political pressures from all sides in order to make his intelligence more objective, was rubbished. He turned out to be right. The disasters that ensued should have given America pause for thought about its intelligence processes; and Britain, too, about its craven reliance on them.

In his final chapters Jeffreys-Jones explores some of the directions into which those thoughts might turn. A transnational intelligence agency is one way: a 'European CIA', for example, or a UN service based on Blix's. One of the

obstacles to that is the British intelligence community's reluctance to give up its powers, and sever or at least counterbalance its American link. Still, if it were possible, there are some good ideas in the wind for making a European system both more efficient, and 'less toxic'. Europe has already sent up its own surveillance orbital satellites, with the object of freeing it from dependence on American – mainly military – systems, access to which could be revoked at any time. In 2005 a group of MPs from across Europe called for 'the depoliticization of intelligence in EU member states, and for a European code of intelligence ethics.'

'Intelligence ethics': the phrase has a ring about it. It could refer to the indiscriminate trawling of private communications which is at the root of the current controversy over Edward Snowden's revelations, with the American NSA and Britain's GCHQ now notoriously in cahoots. It could also cover the question of accountability, and the fact that none of us was told – and few imagined – that this extent of surveillance was going on. 'In a democracy,' Jeffreys-Jones writes, only 'intelligence activities that are properly overseen command the confidence of the people.' It's also surely fundamental to any country's claiming to be a democracy that its people should be told roughly – not the details – what is being done to protect them. If they approve of universal surveillance, or the bugging of allied leaders' phones, then OK. If not, they should bear the democratic consequences. It is here that Jeffreys-Jones believes the US system holds the advantage over Britain's; though whether we can be so confident of that after the Snowden revelations must be doubtful.

At least America's tradition of democratic accountability has engendered some genuine shock there, with official enquiries and reforms apparently under way. In Europe and South America they seem to feel the same. The contrast with Britain is striking. We need to be reminded of Britain's history here. Fifty or a hundred years ago it was regarded as almost the ultimate social sin to spy on other people, except in wartime, and then only on enemies. One example,

extraordinary but not untypical of its time, is the London police sergeant in the 1850s who brought a couple to trial for an 'indecent offence' in a park, but was then demoted to constable for having hidden behind a tree to observe it. Now we accept surveillance cameras in every street, Google's satellite mapping, the use of ATM and shop receipts to track our movements, Amazon nosing in on our tastes in books and music. 'Bloggers' try to protect themselves by using pseudonyms: another practice that would have been regarded as cowardly in more innocent days. Secrecy is respectable. Snowden's revelations must have far less impact in this new cultural environment. After all, as William Hague put it recently:

'If you are a law-abiding citizen of this country going about your business and your personal life you have nothing to fear about the British state or the intelligence services listening to your phone calls or anything like that.'

Didn't Goebbels say something like that? Simon Jenkins calls it 'the motto of police states down the ages'. It may be OK if you can trust your government – or future ones – in any situation. If not, well, ask the Germans, with their recent experience – Angela Merkel's, for example – of police states under two regimes; or, better still, visit the chilling Stasi Museum in Leipzig to witness how – in an extreme case – this can turn out. This may be why the most vocal movement in Europe today to grant Snowden asylum comes from young Germans; not from Britain, where you would have expected it many years ago.

The other problem with the Anglo-American intelligence relationship is 'covert operations': grey and black propaganda, the destabilisation of both other countries and your own, blackmail, assassinations and coups. These have nothing really to do with 'intelligence', strictly defined; yet as Jeffreys-Jones complains, they are 'now as a matter of course lumped in' with it. And they are connected. Secret intelligence gives secret powers, which can be secretly misused. For this, on the Western side, the CIA must be held mainly responsible. Its most egregious plots are well-known: Iran, Chile, Guatemala,

Guyana (fairly democratic regimes, all of them), the Bay of Pigs, the attempt to assassinate Patrice Lumumba in the Congo by poisoning his toothpaste, many attempts on Castro, kidnapping (and more recently 'extraordinary rendition'), the illegal financing of anti-Communist journals abroad, including Britain's moderate-left *Encounter* – the list goes on. The CIA has been widely suspected of further plots, against Australia's Gough Whitlam and Britain's Harold Wilson, for example; which couldn't easily be dismissed as paranoid when all these other things were going on, and look even more plausible today. In the Wilson case it's possible that American intelligence liaised with right-wing members of the British secret services (not MI5 as a whole, as Jeffreys-Jones appears to believe was the renegade Peter Wright's claim). There can be no doubt that, real or imagined, and effective or not in their ostensible aims, these activities 'weakened the moral appeal of American democracy.' As early as 1967 one American journalist described the CIA as 'the single greatest cause of America's world-wide unpopularity', no less.

Behind all this lay two things. The first was the idea that conspiracy was somehow a gentler way to effect political change than brute force, involving less bloodshed, at least among your own people. ('Native' blood, of course, was a different matter; for example in Chile, Iran and Indonesia.) The second was the wish, or need, to effect political change abroad, for either principled or acquisitive reasons. Whichever of these two motives predominated, intelligence used in this way can be seen as an instrument of, firstly, Anglo-American imperialism – 'an attempt by Washington and London to stitch up world politics for years to come'; and, as the relationship between them cooled, imperialism of a more freewheeling American kind: though it also enabled America's politicians to fool themselves that they were innocents in this regard – 'we don't do empire'. (They meant that they didn't formally annex countries any more.) The imperial instinct has also manifested itself in America's reactions to its most recent 'intelligence apostates': not only its treatment of the Wikileaks source Bradley – now Chelsea – Manning, but also its bullying of any

country that even looks like responding positively to Edward Snowden's asylum requests. That hasn't gone down too well with foreign democrats, either. Hence, probably, Britain's and the USA's recent grudging hints of reform. (These must justify Snowden's 'treason', surely.)

Jeffreys-Jones's solution – a tentative one, admittedly – is for Britain to exchange its 'special' intelligence relationship with America for one with the rest of Europe. That would, he believes, bring a 'newer, cleaner form of intelligence that would be acceptable in hitherto puritanical circles', concentrating on 'intelligence, as distinct from foolish adventurism'. It would also be more likely to be truly democratically accountable, at least with respect to its broad functions and methods, while otherwise independent from political interference. All that seems fair enough, if the Europeans really do have as clean hands in this area as their outraged reactions to Snowden's NSA revelations implied. More recent leaks from Snowden suggest that many of them have been almost as intrusive and extensive in their spying as Britain and America; though it is always possible – in all these cases – that much of this has been done by the spooks behind their political masters' and mistresses' backs. Most historians of intelligence can furnish examples of that. It's another reason for the mistrust the system naturally provokes.

One problem with any Europe-wide agency, of course, would be that it would spread the secrets around in a way that made them more difficult to keep. Even Anglo-American intelligence co-operation was thought to have this potential flaw. You might be able to trust your own chaps – but Frenchies? Or – for the Americans – the Brits? (And *vice-versa*, of course.) Why, on the British side, the intelligence community clearly doesn't trust its own compatriots to know even in the most general terms what it is up to. This probably goes back to its 'élite' origins. The British upper (and upper-ish) classes have never been really comfortable with democracy. Hence their resistance to the very (European) idea of 'intelligence ethics'. Secrecy also of course allows them to hide their own incompetences and illegalities, and save their political masters

embarrassment. That may be the reason for the 'shrillness' (Tory MP Dominic Raab's word) of the recent accusations against Snowden by Andrew Parker, head of MI5. (His revelations, Parker claimed, were a 'gift' to the terrorists.)

Until now they've had the American intelligence élite with them on this. But America has its constitutional safeguards, which are coming into play; and a different public opinion from Britain's, whose once proud popular anti-spy tradition seems to have evaporated almost entirely. If the US can exercise a more liberal influence on Britain here, it will be an interesting twist in the long history of their 'special' intelligence relationship. Otherwise – and this seems an extraordinary thing to say in the light of our respective histories – I'd trust the Germans more.

Bernard Porter is Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Newcastle, the author of two books about 'political policing' and another, Empire and Superempire, on American and British imperialism.