

A comedy of errors or a planned attack?

CIA disciplines seven officers over NATO's bombing of Chinese embassy

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Eleven months after NATO's bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has taken action against seven of its officers. One middle level officer was sacked and six others, including a senior manager, have received official reprimands—either verbally or in writing—according to a statement released last Saturday by CIA spokesman Bill Harlow. No names were released.

The punishments, said to have been carried out after two internal investigations, amount to little more than a rap over the knuckles for the CIA and those singled out. Moreover, the accompanying explanation, which was meant to further substantiate the official US claim that the embassy bombing was “a tragic mistake” caused by human error, raises more questions than it answers.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in an article just days after the May 7 attack, the least credible explanation was that it was a pure accident. It pointed out that NATO claims that faulty maps were responsible for the embassy being mistaken for the Yugoslav military supply headquarters simply could not be squared with the facts.

The Chinese embassy was clearly marked on English-language tourist maps, was well known to diplomats, journalists and other visitors to Belgrade, and its address was listed in the Belgrade telephone directory. As well as these publicly available, low-tech items, the US military and the CIA had access to information from the multi-billion dollar US spy satellite network and other hi-tech surveillance systems.

Two articles in the British *Observer* newspaper on October 19 and November 28 provided further corroborative evidence that the NATO targetting of the Chinese embassy had been deliberate. The reports, based on information and interviews with NATO officers including a senior official in NATO's Brussels headquarters, maintained that the attack by the US B2 stealth bomber with highly accurate JDAM precision munitions was carried out because the embassy

was being used to rebroadcast military intelligence for the Yugoslav army or Serbian paramilitaries.

The latest CIA statement baldly reasserts that the embassy had been incorrectly designated by a middle level officer [the one who was sacked] working with inadequate maps. The officer from the agency's clandestine branch had the correct address for the Yugoslav Federal Directorate of Supply and Procurement but then had to guess the building's location because the map he was using did not have numbers for the street in question. The map produced in 1997 by the National Imagery and Mapping Agency showed the Chinese embassy in central Belgrade from where it had moved in 1996.

The CIA was forced to acknowledge that more than one individual was involved. “Numerous CIA officers at all levels of responsibility failed to ensure that the intended target—the Yugoslav Federal Directorate of Supply and Procurement headquarters—had been properly identified and precisely located before the CIA passed a target nomination package to the US military for action.”

In fact, the target was discussed in at least three meetings by CIA officers, before being turned over to the Pentagon for further evaluation and finally to NATO headquarters in Europe. Yet the CIA would have us believe that at none of these stages was the location of the target ever checked. Moreover the target also slipped past a computer cross-check against various data bases listing sensitive sites, such as schools, hospitals and embassies, purportedly because the data had not been recently updated.

The CIA story strains the credibility of all but the most politically naïve. If one swallows the explanation, one would have to believe that it was just good fortune that the “mistake” caused the guided missiles to hit the embassy of China, with whom the US has had tense relations and which opposed the NATO onslaught, rather than another friendlier embassy or a more sensitive target. According to a NATO air controller cited in the November 28 *Observer* article,

however, NATO had accurately pinpointed the correct location of the Chinese embassy and the information had been forwarded to the joint intelligence operational centre in Mons, NATO's European headquarters.

The bombing, which killed three embassy staff and wounded 20 others, justifiably produced an angry reaction by the Chinese leadership and within China where a series of protests erupted outside the US embassy in Beijing. Last week Chinese officials were informed of the CIA's disciplinary action. But on Monday, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao rejected the formal explanation offered by the US saying: "The Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia has unmistakable markings and is also clearly indicated on US maps. The US claim that it did not know its exact location does not hold water."

The explanation provided by the CIA raises a number of unresolved issues.

Firstly, it was unusual that the CIA was involved in targeting at all. According to the *Los Angeles Times* report on the latest CIA statement, "[T]he agency received a special request to help meet the constant demand for new bombing targets during NATO's 11-week bombardment of Yugoslavia." But it was certainly not pressure of overwork that produced the "mistake". CIA director George Tenet pointed out last year that the bombing raid on the Chinese embassy was the first and last time that the CIA was involved in selecting targets during the NATO war. So why was the CIA involved at all? And why the extraordinary coincidence that the CIA, renowned for its dirty operations internationally, was involved in choosing the one target out of hundreds that proved to be an "error"?

Secondly, there is the curious case of the almost hero. According to the CIA statement, Tenet singled out one mid-level analyst for "going well beyond the call of duty to try to rescind what he believed—correctly in hindsight—were discrepancies in the target's location". Based on his personal familiarity with the building's location in Belgrade, he had questioned the targetting both within the CIA and then in two separate phone calls on May 4 and May 7 to the European Command's targetting task force in Naples. The obvious question is why were the repeated warnings of someone with local knowledge completely ignored?

Finally, the CIA story has its own inherent contradictions. According to its statement, the agency simply "lacked formal procedures for preparing and forwarding target nomination packages" to the US military. Yet seven officers have been singled out for punishment.

A lawyer representing one of the CIA officers, Roy Krieger, put his finger on the logical difficulty when he said it was "manifestly unjust" to blame individuals when "the failure was systemic". "It's shameful that the CIA caved in

to political pressure to provide scapegoats. The agency has already publicly admitted that the map provided to the officers contained errors, absent which the Chinese Embassy would not have been mistakenly targetted. These officers were asked to improvise and did their best with the tools provided to them."

Taken together the story hinges on the supposition that the CIA was completely incapable of carrying out the relatively straightforward task of selecting and identifying targets. What resulted was a tragedy-comedy of errors from the initial choice through an elaborate series of checks and crosschecks to the final bombing of the Chinese embassy.

But this explanation is the least plausible. The alternative is far more likely: that the target was deliberately chosen for political purposes and that the CIA was involved for precisely that reason. Far from being a bunch of incompetent buffoons the agency was assigned the delicate task of choosing the target, keeping it a secret from other NATO allies and providing the necessary cover story once the bombing occurred.

As the WSWS noted at the time, the attack on the embassy came at a crucial time for those in the US administration intent on pursuing the war. "It came just days after the G8 foreign ministers summit had produced a draft agreement ostensibly aimed at cutting short the war, and amid intensive activity by the German and Russian administrations to fashion a deal that could be concluded with the Milosevic government." Needless to say, amid the outrage in Belgrade and Beijing, the embassy bombing promptly ended any talk of a peace deal.



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