Britain: Revelations on US spying compared to Pentagon Papers

Paul Mitchell
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The leak of a top-secret memo by Katharine Gun, an intelligence officer at the British government's secret surveillance headquarters, has been compared to the publication of the Pentagon Papers.

Special Branch police arrested Gun in March 2003 under the Official Secrets Act after she admitted leaking a secret memo to a British newspaper about joint United States and British government spying operations at the United Nations before the war in Iraq. On January 19, magistrates ordered Gun to appear for a pre-trial hearing next month in preparation for a full trial at Britain's Central Criminal Court at the end of the year.

The comparison with the Pentagon Papers was made by the former US Defence Department official Daniel Ellsberg, who was responsible for leaking the documents in 1971 to the *New York Times*. Ellsberg said Gun's memo was "more timely and potentially more important than the Pentagon Papers" and "had the potential to block the invasion of Iraq before it began."

The Pentagon Papers were a classified 7,000-page study of American involvement in Vietnam and southeast Asia. They revealed President John F Kennedy's support for a coup that ousted South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem and led to Diem's assassination, and how President Lyndon Johnson planned privately to escalate US forces from 17,000 to 185,000 whilst publicly denying he would increase them. A week after the publication of the Pentagon Papers, the US Senate voted on a timetable to withdraw from Vietnam. The Watergate scandal and the subsequent resignation of President Richard Nixon resulted from the attempt by White House officials to cover up a break-in at a psychiatrist's office to obtain damaging material against Ellsberg.

Ellsberg, actor Sean Penn, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, president of the Newspaper Guild Linda Foley and the American Civil Liberties Union have issued a statement supporting Gun, saying, "We honour Katharine Gun as a whistleblower who bravely risked her career and her very liberty to inform the public about illegal spying in support of a war based on deception. In a democracy, she should not be made a scapegoat for exposing the transgressions of others."

Gun has justified leaking the secret memo by citing the unusual plea of "defence of necessity." She told reporters, "I worked for GCHQ [the government's spy headquarters] as a translator until June 2003. I have been charged with offences under the Official Secrets Act. Any disclosures that may have been made were justified on the following grounds because they exposed serious illegality and wrongdoing on the part of the US Government who attempted to subvert our own security services and to prevent wide-scale death and casualties among ordinary Iraqi people and UK forces in the course of an illegal war. No one has suggested (nor could they), that any payment was sought or given for any alleged disclosures. I have only ever followed my conscience."

A potential witness at Gun's trial is Elizabeth Wilmshurst, deputy legal adviser at the Foreign Office, who is believed to have resigned in March 2003 after disagreeing with the advice given to the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair by the attorney general Lord Goldsmith. Goldsmith suggested that United Nations Resolution 678, which authorised force to remove Iraqi troops from Kuwait in 1990, could be used to justify a new war against Iraq. The British government has insisted that it will not publish Goldsmith's legal advice "in view of a long-standing convention, adhered to by successive governments, that advice of law officers is not publicly disclosed."

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Wilmshurst was amongst those in the British ruling elite, including the security services, who were concerned that a too close identification with the war aims of the Bush administration and the Blair government's readiness to manipulate intelligence were threatening Britain's own strategic interests. Before her disagreements emerged, she served British imperialism loyally in the Foreign Office for 30 years. In 1999, she suggested that the British government claim "sovereign immunity" to stop relatives of the 33 people killed in bomb blasts in Dublin and Monaghan in 1974 from suing it in the Irish courts. The bombings were blamed on Loyalist terrorists, but there have been persistent rumours that the British intelligence services were involved. Described as the "United Kingdom's veteran negotiator," she opposed plans by European countries to unite against Washington's demand for Americans to be exempted from the International Criminal Court.

Within days of the memo appearing in the *Observer*, Gun was arrested. The event was subject to a near blackout by the US media. The publisher of the Pentagon Papers—the *New York Times*—did not even cover the story, and other newspapers downplayed its significance. The *Los Angeles Times* said it was "nothing to get worked up about." According to *Observer* journalist Martin Bright, interviews arranged with the major news networks such as NBC, Fox TV and CNN were abandoned at the last minute.

It was not until last December that an article by the executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy, Norman Solomon, was reproduced in the *Baltimore Sun*, the *Boston Globe* and a few other newspapers. On January 19, the day Gun appeared in court, the *New York Times* finally published an op-ed column entitled "A Single Conscience v. the State" by Bob Herbert.

In the article, Herbert congratulates Gun for her "much better grasp of the true spirit of democracy than Tony Blair" and compares her case to the Pentagon Papers—"perhaps the most extraordinary leak of classified documents in the history of governments." Herbert also interviewed Ellsberg, who said, "What I've been saying since a year ago last October was that I hoped that people who knew that we were being lied into a wrongful war would do what I wish I had done in 1964 or 1965. And that was to go to Congress and the press with documents. Current documents. Don't do what I did. Don't wait years until the bombs are falling and then put out history."

Herbert does not draw the obvious distinction between the role of the *Times* in the 1970s and its role today.

In his memoirs, Richard Nixon claimed that the *Times*'s decision to publish the Pentagon Papers was "clearly the product of the paper's antiwar policy." When *Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger was warned that publication would undermine foreign governments' confidence in the US, he replied, "Oh that's a lot of baloney, I mean, really" and claimed the First Amendment covered his right to publish. Nixon describes how Ellsberg was "lionised by the media" and that "CBS devoted a large segment of the network news to a respectful interview with him even while he was still a fugitive from the FBI."

Thirty years later, the *Times* did its best to conceal mass opposition to the war in Iraq. Its chief foreign affairs columnist Thomas Friedman went as far as to publish proposals on how best to provoke an invasion and seize Iraq's oil wealth, and Judith Miller, another of its reporters, was a major channel for false charges about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

The silence over the Gun case demonstrates that a broad consensus exists within the US ruling elite behind the Bush administration's policy of global conquest and colonial-style subjugation of peoples and regions considered to be of strategic importance.

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