

By Ray McGovern

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I confess to being naïve. From what I had read about “Operation Merlin,” a harebrained scheme to sabotage Iran’s nuclear program, I was convinced that the CIA would be determined to avoid calling more attention to it. Or, by extension, to author James Risen’s continuing revelations – in his new book *Pay Any Price* – of unconscionable incompetence by our intrepid spies. “Merlin” was exposed in an earlier Risen book, *State of War*

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How wrong I was! The decision by the CIA and hired hands at the Justice Department to prosecute former CIA official Jeffrey Sterling reflects, rather, a clear determination to give priority to deterring potential whistleblowers privy to information extremely embarrassing to the government. I repeat, embarrassing to the government, not detrimental to the national security.



*Gen. David Petraeus in a photo with his biographer/mistress Paula Broadwell. (U.S. government photo)*

As for risk of extreme embarrassment once U.S. citizens got additional insight into the dumb schemes of amateur intelligence operators, the government presumably thinks it can depend on mainstream media to treat bungling by our sophomore spies “with discretion.”

In short, the prosecution of Jeffrey Sterling seems to have little to do with exposing secrets, but everything to do with hiding the kind of gross misfeasance that – truth be told – *does* constitute a real and present danger to our national security.

Similarly, one might think the government would be embarrassed when it became more widely known that Jeffrey Sterling did go to Senate Intelligence Committee staffers to tell them of this unconscionably stupid covert action (which involved delivering flawed nuclear weapons blueprints to Iran in 2000 with the goal of sabotaging any bomb-building plans, but the flaws were apparently detected and the real data inadvertently exposed genuine nuclear-weapons secrets).

Sterling’s efforts to go through channels had zero results. One need not be a cynic to conclude that the government apparently sees an overweening, countervailing positive in demonstrating to potential whistleblowers (if further evidence were needed) that going to congressional “overseers” is a feckless exercise and only serves to get you in a peck of trouble. When Risen included a section about Operation Merlin in *State of War*, Sterling became the chief suspect and now faces 10 felony counts, including seven under the Espionage Act.

In this light, is there not supreme irony in former Senate Intelligence Committee chair Diane Feinstein’s plea that former CIA Director David Petraeus not be prosecuted for sharing classified information with his biographer/mistress because he has “suffered enough?” Does one have to be an intelligence officer to appreciate the gravity of that crime, especially since Petraeus served as the agency’s top official? Do the big shots with lots of important friends get one standard of justice and the lower ranks get another?

Apparently, there are some old-timers at the FBI and Justice who deem Petraeus’s alleged indiscretions with classified material eminently worthy to pursue. And they presumably know the sensitivity of what Petraeus shared.

There is sad precedent here. After former CIA Director John Deutch stepped down in December 1996, CIA security discovered that several of his “unclassified” laptop computers – at his home – contained highly classified intelligence information, spurring a formal security investigation. Deutch got a pardon from President Bill Clinton on his last day in office.

With the arrogant Deutch it was above-the-law hubris, pure and simple; there was no sign of any effort to curry the favors of a paramour-cum-biographer. Sadly for Petraeus, L’Affaire Paula Broadwell seems to be over. Perhaps that is part of what Sen. Feinstein has in mind in suggesting he has already “suffered enough”? And he went through all that embarrassment! Poor boy!

A cruelly different standard applies to Jeffrey Sterling, who is alleged to have let the American people in on the secret of a reckless covert action.