

Destroy the whistle-blowers!

by GWYNNE DYER

A long time ago now I was asked to do a television series about the world's intelligence services ? and I turned it down flat. My main reason was a feeling that there was less to the whole intelligence world than met the eye, and the subsequent 30 years have only served to confirm that judgement.

Today's case in point is the recent revelations about the US Central Intelligence Agency. In 2017, it turns out, the CIA flirted with the idea of kidnapping or killing Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, in his refuge in the Ecuadorian embassy in London.

WikiLeaks profoundly embarrassed the CIA in 2010 by putting a huge trove of secret US records about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on the web. Fearing extradition to the United States, Assange (who is Australian), sought asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy in London in 2012.

The pace picked up in early 2017 when Donald Trump became president and made Mike Pompeo head of the CIA. Pompeo quickly convinced himself that the Russians were going to try to spirit Assange out of Britain into their own hands.

So the CIA began planning to preempt the Russians by kidnapping Assange from the embassy and take him to the US ? or, if that didn't work, kill him. Contingency plans were also discussed for thwarting a possible Russian attempt to get Assange out by ramming the getaway vehicle, shooting out the tires of the getaway plane ? or, once again, killing him.

The Russians picked up on all this chatter, and started putting their own operatives in place around the embassy. ?It was beyond comical,? said one former senior Trump official. ?It got to the point where every human being in a three-block radius (of the embassy) was working for one of the intelligence services ? whether they were street sweepers or police officers or security guards.?

The Ecuadorian government changed and Assange was expelled from the London embassy in 2019, but he still faced an American demand for extradition. A British court rejected that early this year, but he continues to sit in prison awaiting the outcome of a US appeal to a higher court.

And here's the thing. None of the information Assange released hurt anybody, and a lot of it needed to be revealed: war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan and government surveillance of tens of millions of U.S. citizens. The CIA made it all secret because it could, not because it was necessary or justifiable.

It's not just American intelligence agencies, of course, and they don't always think about killing those who spill their precious secrets. Thus Israeli Mordechai Vanunu, who confirmed the existence of Israel's nuclear weapons in 1986, was only kidnapped in Italy and jailed in Israel for 18 years (11 years in solitary).

Vanunu's revelation changed nothing: everybody already knew that Israel has nuclear weapons, even if it will never confirm it publicly. Thirty-five years after he was kidnapped, however, Vanunu is still not allowed to leave Israel. If he speaks to foreigners he is arrested, and sometimes jailed again for a few months.

Then there's Edward Snowden, a former CIA employee who revealed huge amounts of data about the US National Security Agency's global surveillance programs in 2013. Revealing that the US was hacking the phones of friendly foreign leaders like Germany's Angela Merkel was the right thing to do, but he can never go home again.

These people are not 'helping terrorists' or betraying their countries. The 'intelligence services' (the old term 'secret services' was less misleading) reflexively build bureaucratic empires and ceaselessly expand their reach because that's what bureaucracies do. They can be useful in war, but the vast bulk of what they do in peacetime is pointless.

I only suspected that in 1990, when the Cold War was just ending. By now, it is blindingly obvious. All these cases are victimless 'crimes' where things that should be known about the illegal, counter-productive, and even criminal behaviour of governments are finally revealed ? and the intelligence services then relentlessly harass the whistle-blowers to frighten others into silence.