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The Pentagon's Unholy Alliance with Missionaries

By Philip Girdi
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Was a Christian non-governmental organization funded by the Pentagon used to smuggle spy equipment into North Korea? Investigative journalist Matthew Cole of the The Intercept has done yeoman's work in ferreting out the details ^[1] of what must surely be one of the most ill-conceived military intelligence operations of all time, and that is saying quite a lot. And Congress was reportedly fully briefed on it, though that has been denied by at least one member of the Intelligence Oversight Committee, who accuses the Pentagon of never pausing to consider the potential blowback that it might produce.

With apologies to Cole for any omissions or misunderstandings on my part, the story goes something like this: in 2004 the Pentagon, fired up by the need to “protect the country” post 9/11, was keen on muscling in on the CIA's virtual monopoly on strategic intelligence collection. Lieutenant General William “Jerry” Boykin, former head of the counter-terrorist Delta Force and at that time deputy in the Pentagon's office of the undersecretary of defense for intelligence, was tasked with improving collection for the military consumers in key crisis areas, including Iran and North Korea. He turned to the task of creating cover mechanisms to be used by his new corps of clandestine warriors.

Boykin, supported by his boss Stephen Cambone and also by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, soon came up with a scheme to smuggle electronic monitoring equipment and other spyware into top priority target North Korea. In intelligence jargon, North Korea was (and still

is) the ultimate “denied area,” a society and government difficult or even nearly impossible to penetrate because of strict population control and a high level of security. At that time the United States had no spies inside the secretive nuclear-armed country telling Washington what was going on. What little information was available on North Korea came primarily from surveillance satellites, from South Korea’s own spy services, and from the very limited intelligence that was being shared by China.

Boykin, who might reasonably be described as an extremely devout evangelical Christian, worked with another evangelical Christian acquaintance named Kay Hiramine to use an existing religious charity he ran called Humanitarian International Services Group (HISG). HISG was to be developed as a mechanism to create a so-called rat line enabling the smuggling of monitoring equipment into North Korea under cover of shipments of used clothing that the regime in Pyongyang was occasionally allowing to enter the country.

The HISG charity was funded by the Pentagon to the tune of an estimated \$15 million during the course of the operation, all of which was channeled through three proprietary cover mechanisms. New Millennium Trust, run by a former Delta Force military lawyer, funneled money to an ostensible charity called Working Partners Foundation, run by a car dealer in Colorado who was paid \$252,000 in 2006, which in turn passed the money on to HISG. A separate entity called Private Sector Consulting paid HISG salaries and provided other support. The cover mechanisms for funding were established to move the money and conceal the Department of Defense connection. Hiramine, for his part, received a \$281,351 salary from Private Sector Consulting.

Whether anything could in fact be smuggled into North Korea past the suspicious and watchful border security guards was questionable, but in a test run the HISG charity managed to successfully conceal a large number of bibles in a hidden compartment at the bottom of a shipping container topped up with used winter clothing, a highly prized commodity for starving and freezing North Koreans.

From that point the narrative gets a little bit fuzzy. Boykin retired from the Pentagon in 2007 but the program continued to run with one officer describing it as a “jobs program” for Boykin’s friends, most of whom appear to be, like him, evangelical Christians. It is reported that short wave radios and some electronic devices intended to monitor nuclear programs as well as interfere with North Korean military communications were indeed smuggled into the country by unwitting Christian missionaries, aid workers, and Chinese smugglers, but whether they provided any critical intelligence is unclear. The operation continued to run during the Obama administration, finally winding down in 2013. While it is certain that George W. Bush’s Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld knew of and approved the operation, it is not known if either the Bush or Obama White Houses had explicit knowledge of it.

Some background on the usual restraints governing how the United States runs covert intelligence operations overseas is necessary. The charity involved in the Pentagon initiative is what is referred to as a non-governmental organization, or NGO. NGOs are not organized like businesses or corporations in that their primary objective is only peripherally linked to making money and their objectives vary considerably. The ones that are encountered overseas frequently have either charitable or educational functions.

NGOs are fair game for infiltration and cover by intelligence organizations, but their exploitation in that fashion is extremely uncommon. That is because it is impossible to control all the unwitting players in an NGO and any such operation would be susceptible to eventual exposure, with the damage derived from potential blowback far exceeding any possible gain.

The United States government does in fact impose a ban on recruiting certain categories of individuals as spies. Clergymen are off limits partly for ethical reasons but more because the exposure of such a relationship would be devastating both to the religious organization itself and to the United States government. Use of the U.S. taxpayer-funded Peace Corps is also banned because exploiting it would potentially turn its volunteers into targets for terrorists. Recruitment of journalists whose reporting potentially might appear in the U.S. media is also forbidden because the distribution of intelligence agency-produced stories could be construed as an attempt to covertly influence opinion and policies inside the United States. Ironically, the federal government officially opposes spy agency disinformation even though it does the same thing through the judicious leaking of information from the White House and Pentagon.

NGOs and individuals that operate as charities like *Medecins sans Frontieres* (Doctors without Borders), the victim of the recent bombing in Kunduz, Afghanistan, might in theory be exploited by an intelligence agency. But there is considerable risk of unfortunate consequences when doing so. One need only cite the case of the Pakistani doctor Shakil Afridi, who was recruited in 2011 as part of the CIA's pursuit of Osama bin Laden. Afridi covered his search for bin Laden DNA by providing vaccinations against polio. After the story broke, polio eradication projects throughout south Asia foundered, leading to a resurgence in the disease and the injuring and killing by militants of numerous health care workers. Exploiting a humanitarian medical cover proved to be damaging to everyone involved, particularly as a risk-versus-gain analysis suggests that the information provided by Shakil Afridi did not in any way prove critical to the success of the operation to kill bin Laden. In 2014, the White House announced that U.S. intelligence would no longer exploit vaccination programs.

When the Pentagon sought to exploit a religious charity to infiltrate North Korea, all kinds of red flags should have gone up. But they did not because Boykin was relying on his personal relationships and his status as a former head of Delta Force to make the operation untouchable. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, who served on the Intelligence Committee at the time, insists that no one in Congress was briefed. She commented astutely on the downside to the operation, observing that "...to use unwitting aid workers on behalf of an intelligence operation, people who genuinely do humanitarian work, to turn their efforts into intel collection is unacceptable. Now we have people who have been hired to do some good work and become unwitting accomplices to an intelligence mission? They can face all kinds of retaliation. It is completely unacceptable."

Intelligence officers and combat arms soldiers pride themselves on being able to "get the job done" in spite of all obstacles, which often blinds them to the consequences of their actions. Boykin, a product of that tradition—and driven by his own conceit that he needed to do what was necessary to "save" the United States—inevitably failed to recognize that the eventual exposure of the scheme would produce a reaction among foreigners who are already inclined to be suspicious of proselytizing Christians. Now it will be plausibly believed that Christian charities are actually hotbeds of American spies and the likely response will be commensurate with that

perception. Using a Christian charity to spy puts at risk all the employees and volunteers linked to that specific organization while helping propagate the myth that any indigenous Christian is a potential traitor.

HISG and its three cover support mechanisms were all disbanded in 2013-14, but not because the Pentagon was concerned about the possible consequences of its actions. It seems that the operation had provided little useful intelligence, not a particularly surprising outcome: Using unwitting and unfocused humanitarian charity volunteers and employees to smuggle in spy gear was a non-starter right from the beginning and should never have been attempted.

I am waiting for a sheepish Pentagon or White House to proclaim that it will never again exploit religiously-affiliated groups as intelligence cover mechanisms. But unfortunately, all I am hearing is silence.