



THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

*Spies R Us: A History of the CIA*

*Programme 2: Losing Friends and Influencing No One*

*Presenter: Tom Mangold*

*Editor: Maria Balinska*

---

GOODMAN Vietnam is a clear example that the intelligence can be spot on, but if the policymakers are not reading it or not paying attention to it, it doesn't matter what frequency the intelligence community is on.

SICK In Iran, the CIA were not a neutral observer and they had something at stake. And the stake was their relationship with the Shah and his regime that was extremely important to them. They were simply not prepared to sit back and look at it objectively.

MANGOLD Vietnam and Iran – two examples of how the CIA lost the intelligence game despite being right in the first case and plain wrong in the second. In Vietnam the CIA's customers at home just didn't want to hear what the Agency was saying. In Iran, the CIA was too myopic to see the truth – with profound consequences for America's understanding of Islamic fundamentalism. In this week's programme in my series on CIA history, I'm going to show just how and why these errors occurred. And why these failures still stalk Washington's policy makers to this day. We begin with America's disastrous involvement in Vietnam, famously described in fiction by Graham Greene. The conventional view of the CIA in Saigon; "Quiet Americans" – naïve, blundering, bamboozled. But Graham Greene's judgment was far too harsh. What he didn't know at the time was that whenever the CIA was right in its assessments, it was cold-shouldered by its political masters at home.

KERR The worst thing you can do with intelligence, from my perspective at least, is to be ignored by your policy makers.

MANGOLD Dick Kerr, former Deputy Director of Central Intelligence. His career at CIA goes back to 1960 as the communists in North Vietnam began to fight to reunite the North with the catholic, capitalist South.

KERR There is on a regular basis information that, in effect, says to the president if he's sensitive, "Your policy's not working." Intelligence is saying, "We're assessing what's happening on the ground – the object of your policy – and it's not happening the right way. In fact, it may be doing exactly the opposite of what you want."





THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

SCOWCROFT Well, there was a great deal of unrealism about Vietnam. In the first place, we were never crystal clear about what our objectives were, what would constitute success and what would be required to achieve success and the intelligence estimates played into all that. And my recollection is, you're right: that in retrospect the Agency proved to be fairly accurate in its assessment of supplies coming in and the strength of the Viet Cong and so on and so forth. But it was not welcome news, and the Pentagon frequently liked to characterise the CIA as being inhabited by a bunch of left-wingers who didn't really understand the nature of communism.

MANGOLD That was wonderfully ironic for the CIA as it faced mounting criticism from the radical left throughout the world for its perceived role in stoking the Vietnam war. The truth is when young reporters, such as myself, arrived to cover the war, we found a well-informed CIA and expert agent-runners in place. The military men, on the other hand, spent only a year in country – insufficient time to understand their enemy, both regular troops and the Viet Cong or VC. When they reported that the enemy was six feet tall, they were cleverly stroking Washington. But that's not the more complex enemy that John Sullivan, a CIA polygraph examiner working in Vietnam in the early Seventies, came across.

SULLIVAN We got a radio message to pick up a VC prisoners that had just been captured. We landed in a mangrove swamp in a place called Goh Kong and there were two American GIs with this emaciated, gaunt, wounded VC. He was about five feet seven inches tall, he couldn't have weighed a hundred pounds: he was obviously starved. He had his hands tied behind his back, he had a blindfold on, but tears were running down his face; little shrapnel wounds all over him. And my thought at that point was, "We have been fighting these people for twenty years. This is the enemy." And the contrast between him and his two American captors – who looked the picture of health, well-equipped, well-dressed – and I said, "Lord, if we haven't done it by now, we're not going to do it."

MANGOLD Now, John, you are, with respect, a fairly humble CIA officer in Saigon station. If this message gets through to you, and you can see this, why didn't the message get through to your chief of station and why didn't it get through to Washington and Langley?

SULLIVAN Oh, I think it got through, but it was ignored.

THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

PRESIDENT LYNDON JOHNSON            Their objective is not the fulfilment of Vietnamese nationalism. It is to erode and to discredit America's ability to help prevent Chinese domination over all of Asia.

MANGOLD                                    There was by now a serious breach between President Lyndon Johnson's White House and the CIA's view of America's engagement in Vietnam. But Washington doggedly clung to its position. The trouble was if the CIA was right – if the Northern forces were smaller than originally estimated; if the movement was more nationalist than communist; and if there was no Moscow gold – then much of the politico-military case for the war simply collapsed. George Allen spent sixteen years with the CIA working on Vietnam.

ALLEN                                        The Agency was focused on the kind of war that it really was – that is, a Mao Tse Tung-type of people's liberation war – and we targeted what we were doing against that particular war.

MANGOLD                                    Now, my understanding is that you didn't say to Washington, "This war is unwinnable." You just said, "It could take much, much longer than you imagine and it's going to be much more of a knock-down, drag-out fight. What did you then feel when you saw more and more United States troops being brought into Vietnam?"

ALLEN                                        It was very discouraging and very demoralising. Most of the people I worked with saw it as turning the nature of the war into one where it would appear that we were attempting to impose our colonial rule over the country. It appeared to us it was playing right into the hands of the enemy. Most of the Vietnamese people we talked to challenged us, asking us, "What is it you're trying to do?"

McNAMARA                                    We'll stay for as long as it takes. We shall provide whatever help is required to win the battle against the communist insurgents.

MANGOLD                                    By now Washington was witnessing a self-fulfilling prophecy. As thousands more American troops flooded into the country and U.S. bombers struck Hanoi, the conflict did take on the appearance of an old-fashioned colonial struggle. The more American military might poured into the country, so the insurgents from the South – and later the more disciplined battalions from the North – fought even harder. To make matters worse, the CIA, while determined to protect the front of the building, made the mistake of leaving the back door ajar. South Vietnamese









THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

religious leader called Ayatollah Khomeini, was attracting worldwide attention. The sleeping giant of Islamic Radicalism was beginning to stretch and flex. Where was the CIA? Not where it should have been in the tearooms and sweaty bazaars of Teheran, but comfortably inside the perfumed palace and far too close to their man on the Peacock Throne – the Shah of Iran. This is President Jimmy Carter singing from the CIA hymn sheet as late as 1979.

CARTER Iran, because of the great leadership of the Shah, is an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world. This is a great tribute to you, Your Majesty, and to your leadership, and to the respect and the admiration and love which your people give to you.

SICK The CIA came to be immensely dependent on the Shah – not just to tell them what was going on in Iran but because that was not seen as a very big problem.

MANGOLD Dr. Gary Sick, President Jimmy Carter's man on the National Security Council responsible for Iranian affairs.

SICK The Shah was regarded as being on top of things, very much in control, not under threat at all. And so the internal politics didn't seem to be that interesting or exciting. But the Shah was prepared to co-operate very actively with regard to intelligence on the Soviet Union – we had several big sites located in Iran, secret sites that tracked missile development in the Soviet Union – and to keep track of regional affairs, the co-operation between the Shah and the station chief in Iran was very, very close. So the station chief basically had an appointment to see the Shah on a regular basis, like once a week. And they had a long, detailed discussion and an exchange of information in which, you know, the CIA found this to be just an extraordinarily useful relationship. And, as a result, they were probably the last who were willing to admit that something terrible was going on here when the Shah started to fall. They were far, far behind the game.

ARCHIVE: TEHRAN 1979 This has been the day of the revolution. The people seized control from the Shah's government and all it stood for. Army barracks were plundered and guns distributed almost like confetti. They toppled statues of the Shah and sent soldiers and police running for their lives. The atmosphere was euphoric. In one fell swoop, it seemed, Iran had become an Islamic republic.

THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

MANGOLD – LOCATION Well, everything is easy with hindsight – but intelligence agencies are paid for their *foresight*. They have a weak defence if that fails – and the CIA did fail to anticipate the potential of a powerful new movement, one that would change the face of politics in the region and then beyond. And there was a further problem for the Agency with its customers back home. Did the executive arm of government here in Washington really want to hear that its Iranian policy was failing? Now, in one sense this mirrored the CIA's Vietnam dilemma. When I went to see Admiral Stansfield Turner, who was Director of Central Intelligence during the overthrow of the Shah's regime, he was remarkably frank about the unwisdom of playing Cassandra to one's political masters.

TURNER For us in the intelligence world to have gone to the president and said, "We think Iran is about to crumble," would have been a major change in US policy. It's hard for anybody to go that much against the opinion that has built up in this country as to what the relationship with Iran would be. And, in addition, there's the danger in our country that if you start that kind of a thought around it will leak out, and it will become a really major issue of relationships with a country like Iran.

MANGOLD But Admiral, if I read you correctly, what you're saying here is quite unusual: that, even if you had had the intelligence, you would have been too wary of, possibly frightened of the policy makers and the executive to tell them the truth.

TURNER No, I'm trying to say that to come to the conclusion that this was the truth would have been very difficult because it would have been running so contrary to the tide of opinion about what our relationship with Iran was.

MANGOLD Admiral Turner admitting that there were moments when the CIA found discretion the diplomatic substitute for valour, thus ignoring the Agency's own motto: "*You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.*" The result was a policy catastrophe for the United States; the political dividend for Washington was deep humiliation as American citizens, including CIA officers, were taken hostage. And, as the revolution overwhelmed the country, the Agency even failed to shred its secret papers properly. One major reason for the *débâcle*, according to Reuel Marc Gerecht who worked on the Iranian desk at the Agency after the Islamic revolution, was that the CIA's recruiting policy had failed.

GERECHT The general understanding in the Agency was, as one senior officer put it to me, who was in fact an Iran desk chief and later became

THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

a chief of the Near East Division, is that a good case officer can go anywhere. So he actually referred to officers as being peripatetic – that cultural differences shouldn't prevent them from serving all over the world.

MANGOLD How is it possible to work undercover as a covert operator without first hosing yourself down with the language and the culture of the target country?

GERECHT That's an excellent question. You would think it would be a bit surreal.

MANGOLD Has it changed?

GERECHT No.

MANGOLD A bleak inquest on an intelligence failure and the gloomy prediction that the lessons have still not been learned. CIA station chiefs, comfortable with submitting routine *political* reports to head office, always through the prism of Soviet communism, simply didn't foresee that a new non-communist force had entered the political scene. Gary Sick, formerly of the National Security Council.

SICK There was no Islamic fundamentalism for all practical purposes before Iran. I mean, this was the first major manifestation of Islamic fundamentalism, of Islamic politics, Islamism. It was not something we were familiar with at all. So the whole concept was new and radical and required a serious shift of thinking. And a friend of mine said to me at the time, "You know, whoever took religion seriously?" You dealt with politics and religion really had very little to do with that. Now that sounds incredibly naïve, but at the time it was not part of the tool chest of American or other observers in the region. We were simply beginning to discover that religion could, in fact, be used for political purposes and could have major political consequences.

THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

MANGOLD

But it took twenty-two years for the penny to drop all the way. Then it was too late. The full force of religion and politics struck on September 11th, 2001. Next week, in the last of my series, I'll be looking at the Agency post-9/11 and particularly at some of the moral issues that have arisen now that the CIA has been given a licence to kill.