

Canada's man in Tehran was a CIA spy

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Ken Taylor, the Canadian diplomat celebrated 30 years ago for hiding U.S. embassy personnel during the Iranian revolution, actively spied for the Americans and helped them plan an armed incursion into the country.

Mr. Taylor, ambassador in Iran from 1977 to 1980, became “the de facto CIA station chief” in Tehran after the U.S. embassy was seized by students on Nov. 4, 1979, and 63 Americans, including the four-member Central Intelligence Agency contingent, were taken hostage.

Had his espionage been discovered, Mr. Taylor told The Globe and Mail in an interview this week, “the Iranians wouldn’t have tolerated it. And the consequences may have been severe.”

His intelligence-gathering activities were kept secret by agreement between the Canadian and the U.S. governments, although his role in sheltering six Americans and helping to spirit them out of Iran was later made public, winning him and the Canadian government widespread U.S. gratitude.

Trent University historian Robert Wright, author of *Our Man in Tehran*, a new account of the incident released today, strongly implies that then-prime-minister Joe Clark insisted Mr. Taylor’s spying be kept quiet, fearing a negative political fallout if the Canadian public learned that one of its envoys was a U.S. spook.

Mr. Taylor himself said he never expected the story to come out. “It had been under wraps for 30 years, and my assumption was that it would be for another 30 years. I didn’t expect to be here to talk about it.”

The phrase “de facto CIA station chief” appears in Prof. Wright’s book, the manuscript of which Mr. Taylor saw and approved in advance of publication.

The request that he provide “aggressive intelligence” for the Americans was made personally by U.S. president Jimmy Carter to Mr. Clark, likely in a telephone conversation on Nov. 30, 1979, according to Prof. Wright.

Mr. Clark gave his approval, and informed his foreign minister, Flora MacDonald, who passed the request on to Mr. Taylor. He instantly agreed.

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From that point on, what amounted to the U.S. intelligence operation in Iran was run by Mr. Taylor from the Canadian embassy. The daily information he sent out was seen by only two officials at what was then the Department of External Affairs in Ottawa – Louis Delvoie, director of the intelligence analysis division, and Pat Black, assistant undersecretary for

security and intelligence.

They showed the cables to Mr. Clark and Ms. MacDonald before passing them on to the U.S. ambassador in Ottawa, Kenneth Curtis, who in turned forwarded them to Washington.

What precisely Mr. Taylor was doing needs careful definition. In reality, he was managing a Canadian, not a U.S., intelligence station, which the Americans – because they had no network of their own after their embassy was seized – wanted to join.

The first CIA agent sent into Iran after the hostage-taking was rejected by Mr. Taylor as unsuitable. He left the country. The second agent sent in, code-named “Bob,” won Mr. Taylor’s approval and thereafter operated out of the Canadian embassy.

Mr. Delvoie had the job of insulating Mr. Taylor from interference from CIA headquarters in Langley, Va. Thus, Mr. Taylor on his own managed Bob, and all of Bob’s reports were sent to his Langley spymasters through Mr. Taylor. He was in charge.

The ambassador’s chief accomplice was Jim Edward, head of security at the Canadian embassy. He, like Mr. Taylor, was given the choice of whether to spy for the Americans and, like Mr. Taylor, readily accepted.

He became a clandestine operative assigned by the ambassador to snoop for military intelligence while mingling inconspicuously with crowds of Iranians outside the U.S. embassy – an unlikely mission for the fair-haired, blue-eyed, broad-shouldered, six-foot-tall Canadian Forces sergeant.

The two men – at times in collaboration with Bob – assessed potential helicopter landing sites, arranged for trucks to be garaged at a secret location in Tehran and analyzed other logistics in preparation for a commando raid, dubbed Operation Eagle Claw, to free the hostages held at the embassy.

Sgt. Edward’s specific job was to report on the number of guards at the embassy, how they were armed and when they changed shifts, ascertain where specifically the hostages were being held and track the daily movement of people and goods in and out of the compound – particularly the inward passage of foodstuffs and outward movement of waste, which allowed Mr. Taylor to calculate the hostages’ daily caloric intake and assess their general health.

In conversation with The Globe this week, Mr. Taylor said he felt confident taking on the U.S. intelligence enterprise because Iran at the time was in chaos and the risk was minimal (although Sgt. Edward and his Iranian girlfriend Layla at one point were detained and questioned for five hours by Revolutionary Guards).

Mr. Taylor also said he was sure he could have got the “houseguests” – the six Americans sheltered in his and embassy immigration counsellor John Sheardown’s residences – out of Iran without U.S. help, but the Americans didn’t want the Canadians to move alone.

What frustrated Mr. Taylor and Ottawa was that the Americans wouldn’t stay focused on the houseguests, although there was evidence that The New York Times and Jean Pelletier, Washington correspondent for Montreal’s La Presse, had got wind of their presence in Canadian hideouts.

Ms. MacDonald decided to press her U.S. counterpart, secretary of state Cyrus Vance, to do something, providing a fascinating footnote to Canadian political history: the details of why she wasn't in Parliament on Dec. 13, 1979, for the vote that felled Mr. Clark's minority government.

She was in Brussels for a NATO ministers meeting. The meeting ended but Ms. MacDonald took advantage of being in the same city as Mr. Vance to seek a meeting with him. Face to face, she told him the Canadians would put the houseguests "on donkeys and send them across the border" if the Americans didn't move.

She then missed her flight across the Atlantic, and missed the vote.

The CIA working with Mr. Taylor arranged for the houseguests, using Canadian passports, to "exfiltrate" Tehran on a flight to Zurich on Jan. 27, 1980. Mr. Taylor then closed the embassy and left with his staff.

The last of the U.S. embassy hostages were not released until Mr. Carter's successor, Ronald Reagan, was inaugurated on Jan. 20, 1981 - 444 days after the embassy had been overrun.

Prof. Wright started working on a book about the hostage incident at the suggestion of his editor at HarperCollins Canada who noted that the 30th anniversary was approaching.

To his surprise, Mr. Taylor said he was telephoned by a senior spokesman at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Rodney Moore, and asked whether he wanted to participate in the project.

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