

Exposing Shabby Intelligence

There's a long history of skepticism among ex-spooks.

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Global Research, March 25, 2017

[The American Conservative](#) 23 March 2017

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

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There is a perception among some of the public and within the alternative media that America's burgeoning national-security state is a monolith, a collective entity pursuing its own interests regardless of what is good for the country or its people. From both progressives and conservatives who mistrust the government, I often hear comments such as, "Once in the CIA, always in the CIA"—as if onetime employment in the agency forms an unbreakable bond.

Those familiar with both the national-security community and the peace movement are aware that something like the reverse is true. Individuals who were attracted to careers in intelligence, law enforcement, or the military are often sticklers for doing what is right rather than what is expedient. That often puts them at odds with their political masters, leading sometimes to resignations and a resulting overrepresentation of former national-security professionals in the anti-war movement.

One manifestation of this is an organization of former national-security officers, including myself, called Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, or VIPS. VIPS was founded in 2003 out of revulsion on the part of many former officials over the shabby intelligence that was driving the decision to invade Iraq. The group includes officials from the whole alphabet soup of national security—CIA, NSA, FBI, FS (Foreign Service), and DOD. VIPS's emergence and its ongoing letters of protest on national-security policy reflect a reality going back to the early debates surrounding the U.S. government's stealthy escalation of the Vietnam War and its woeful handling of that conflict, ending in a humiliating defeat.

The lies that led to that Vietnam experience produced one of the first well-known rebels against intelligence corruption. Sam Adams, a CIA analyst who was assigned to the agency's Vietnam desk in 1965, observed that the strength estimates for the North Vietnamese Army and Vietcong guerrillas consistently underreported the true strength of the enemy. This led to a prolonged conflict with Army and White House officials, as well as with Adams's own bosses, all of whom promoted the false notion that the Vietnam challenge was a limited insurgency easily defeated, a fabrication intended to ensure U.S. popular support for the conflict.



Michael Hogue

Though Adams eventually was forced out of the agency, he continued to expose how intelligence had been hijacked to suit a political agenda. He served as a witness in the trial of Daniel Ellsberg, the man behind the Pentagon Papers revelations. He wrote about the

Vietnam “cover-up” and spoke to the House Intelligence Committee’s Pike Commission, which credited his allegations.

Today there are many former national-security officials in the mold of Sam Adams. For many, the disillusionment with the corruption of intelligence and betrayal of national security began with Iraq. CIA officers in the clandestine service such as European Division chief Tyler Drumheller pushed hard against CIA Director George Tenet and the White House, insisting that field reporting demonstrated that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction. Drumheller also dismissed “Curveball,” the German-Iraqi source of the false intelligence that Iraq was building mobile biological-weapons labs. The source, said Drumheller, was merely “a guy trying to get his green card essentially, in Germany, and playing the system for what it was worth.”

CIA analysts also sought to expose false claims that Iraqi intelligence officials had met with al-Qaeda. Senior State Department officials John Kiesling, John Brown, and Ann Wright resigned over the march to an avoidable war.

For others, increasing governmental attacks on the Constitution proved decisive. National Security Agency (NSA) officer Tom Drake went through channels after he learned the agency was illegally collecting information on U.S. citizens in violation of the Fourth Amendment. He was joined by former NSA officers William Binney, J. Kirk Wiebe, and Ed Loomis. Their efforts were rebuffed by the government. Despite whistleblower protections, Drake later was charged under the Espionage Act.

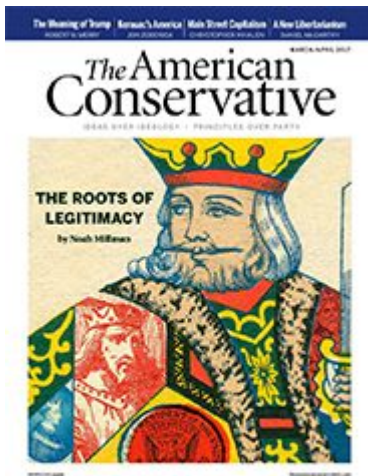
The large numbers of former foot soldiers in the national-security establishment who are now opposed to the warfare state should be an eye opener for many Americans, suggesting that there is no “high confidence” among many of those who are actually best positioned to know the truth regarding Washington’s perpetual warfare policies.

Which brings us back to VIPS and the dissident former national-security officers who have found a home there. One is Tom Drake, who was involved from the start, as was Ray McGovern, a former senior CIA analyst and presidential briefer. VIPS has produced 47 memos on national-security policy. Its first official action was a February 2003 memo to President George W. Bush condemning the United Nations speech by Secretary of State Colin Powell that established the pretext for invading Iraq. The memo said,

“you would be well served if you widened the discussion beyond ... the circle of those advisers clearly bent on a war for which we see no compelling reason and from which we believe the unintended consequences are likely to be catastrophic.”

More recently, VIPS has raised serious questions about the conclusion of U.S. intelligence agencies that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered “Russian hacking” designed to destabilize American politics and, if possible, put Donald Trump in the presidency. The group called on President Obama to release solid evidence of this, even if it creates difficulty for ongoing intelligence operations. The former security officials suggested the evidence released by the government thus far “does not pass the smell test,” and they noted particularly the lack of any public evidence linking the Russians to WikiLeaks, which published the bulk of the information in question.

“We urge you to authorize public release of any tangible evidence that takes us beyond the unsubstantiated, ‘we-assess’ judgments by the intelligence agencies,” said the VIPS statement, addressed to Obama. “Otherwise, we ... will be left with the corrosive suspicion that the intense campaign of accusations is part of a wider attempt to discredit the Russians and those—like Mr. Trump—who wish to deal constructively with them.”



This article appears in the
March/April 2017 issue.

The VIPS statement didn't get much attention. Indeed, such warnings from former intelligence, security, law-enforcement, and military personnel are largely frozen out of the establishment media. When VIPS presents its annual Sam Adams award for integrity in intelligence, the recipients get more media attention in Europe than in the U.S. Rarely do the 50-plus associates of VIPS appear in the U.S. mainstream media, although they are frequently interviewed by the foreign press, particularly in Western Europe.

The government also does its best to repress any dissident opinion by requiring many former intelligence and law-enforcement personnel to have their writings reviewed by security officers prior to publication. The reviews can take months, make no effort to accommodate publishing deadlines, and often result in a heavily redacted text that is unreadable. The government sometimes strikes back in less subtle ways. Ray McGovern's 2006 return of his Intelligence Commendation Medal over reports of CIA torture led to a provision in the Intelligence Authorization Act of 2007 enabling Congress to strip retirees of their pensions.

Pushback from former national-security officials is a good thing for the country and the agencies once served by these dissidents. Just as the Founders envisioned a citizen army so the defense of the nation would be in the hands of the people, a national-security structure responsive to responsible dissent should be cherished. The Obama administration, to its discredit, routinely punished legitimate whistleblowers and covered up its misdeeds through invocation of the state-secrets privilege. We can hope that the new Trump administration will have the wisdom and confidence to call off the dogs.

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