

Is There More to the Flynn Story? The Anglo-American Intelligence Nexus

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The American media is ignoring a story from London about the [abrupt resignation](#) of Robert Hannigan, the head of Britain's highly secretive Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), which is the code breaking equivalent of the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA). Hannigan's resignation on January 23 surprised everyone, with only a few hours' notice provided to his staff. He claimed in a press release that he wanted to spend more time with his family, which reportedly includes a sick wife and elderly parents. Given the abruptness of the decision, it seems likely to be a cover story.

The British media is [speculating](#) that Hannigan was pushed out because he was resistant to sharing sensitive intelligence with the Trump White House, but that story makes no sense. The UK's formidable GCHQ does indeed have significant resources that make it the most valued partner for the NSA, but the bilateral flow of information is predominantly from Washington to London, making the relationship more valuable to Britain than to the U.S., no matter who is president.

Hannigan, who is only 51, was a senior civil servant brought into GCHQ in November 2014 for an anticipated four-year tour of duty. He was tasked with initiating reforms in the wake of the Snowden revelations. Hannigan promised more openness and accountability. But one of his first moves was to condemn attempts by mostly U.S. technology companies to restrict government access to their messaging systems, making them "the command and control networks of choice" for terrorists.

More recently, he has authorized public relations demonstrations, [including](#) illuminating his headquarters building in the rainbow colors of the LGBTQ flag.

For those who have been following such developments, the European media's feeding frenzy regarding Donald Trump and his administration has made any but the most rabid U.S. news outlets look highly civilized by way of comparison. The British press has been a leader in that effort and anti-Trump demonstrations are both large and frequent in London and other cities. Hostility to Trump is consequently strong both within the British government and among the people, including motions in Parliament and petitions to ban the American president from Britain.

Britain, like the U.S., has three principal intelligence agencies: GCHQ corresponds to NSA; the Secret Intelligence Service (MI-6) is the British CIA; and MI-5 works on internal security like America's FBI. The CIA and NSA report to the president, while MI-6 and GCHQ answer to the UK foreign secretary, who in turn is accountable to the prime minister. MI-5 is under the British government's Joint Intelligence Committee, while the FBI is directed by the U.S.

attorney general.

The heads of CIA, NSA, the FBI, GCHQ, MI-6, and MI-5 together constitute what is likely to be the world's most exclusive club. Though most intelligence is shared with the other "Five Eyes" English-speaking countries (Canada, New Zealand, and Australia), it is the Anglo-American relationship that drives the process and produces most of the information. As the [Downing Street memo](#) demonstrated in its assertion that the Iraq War intelligence and facts "were being fixed around the policy," Brits and Americans are frequently inclined to do each other favors, even when they know that the enterprise they might be engaging in is not "going by the book."

The Hannigan resignation is not occurring in a vacuum, and some in the large and highly networked retired intelligence community have come to believe that it is connected to the investigation and downfall of Trump's first national-security advisor, Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn. Former federal prosecutor Andrew McCarthy [has detailed](#) exactly how the Flynn case does not appear to fit into any acceptable category that would have mandated an investigation and interrogation by the FBI. Surveillance of a Russian official would be authorized under FBI guidelines, but to extend that type of monitoring or investigation to a U.S. citizen would require specific authority from the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) court to issue a warrant based on probable cause.

There is no evidence that that was ever done. Flynn was not an actual or suspected foreign intelligence agent, and it would be ridiculous to suggest that he might be so inclined. Nor was he engaged in any criminal activity or unwittingly connected to an ongoing investigation. Indeed, apart from possibly dissimulating over what he said, he basically did nothing wrong. There were no grounds for him to be questioned ("[grilled](#)" according to the *New York Times*) by the FBI, and whether or not he misled Vice President Pence over the content of his December phone calls with Russian Ambassador Sergei Kislyak is a matter for the president and his advisers to sort out from a political perspective, which is indeed what eventually took place.

Regarding the actual development of the investigation of Flynn, recall for a moment that we are dealing with at least some individuals at the top levels of national-security organizations who did not hesitate to break the law, leaking information to the media on the highly classified telephone intercepts. Some government employees have gone to jail for doing just that. That revelation alone might be considered a major security breach, since the Russians learned they were being intercepted and have likely tightened up their communications procedures, meaning there will be no more freebies.

Why would these leakers do it? The investigation of Flynn was initiated by high-level Obama officials who had access to tightly controlled and normally inaccessible information. "Obama advisers" were [reportedly working directly](#) with the FBI to investigate Flynn.

Many of those advisers and other high officials had lost much in the electoral outcome and some might certainly have been seeking payback, while the lame-duck White House could have been looking for ways to preemptively weaken the incoming administration.

The FBI or NSA would have been recording the conversations of the Russian ambassador as a legitimate exercise of their authority, but the normal procedure involving inadvertent intercept of a soon-to-be high-ranking American would be to redact that part of the

conversation or otherwise “minimize” it to conceal his or her identity. Leaking the classified information thus obtained to the media portraying Flynn, and by extension Trump, in a bad light would require reconstruction of the original documents and might be risky to carry out. Even if the enterprise could be seen as a good move politically if one were a Democrat, it would not pay to do it too directly, as someone might eventually backtrack and find out the source.

That being so, it might not be too preposterous to consider discreetly asking the Brits what they might have in a folder somewhere on calls and other contacts made by Flynn. As Flynn was known to be in touch with senior government officials all over the world, GCHQ might well have content or corroboration that NSA could have missed. Pull together enough “foreign sourced” stuff that way, imply something possibly untoward about all of it, send it on over to the CIA liaison, and you have a *prima facie* case that would satisfy the admittedly willing-to-be-convinced Obama Justice Department that Flynn might be up to something that could potentially damage national security.

Enter the FBI at that point to open an investigation. And focus on the Russian aspect as it supports the official Democratic Party narrative that “Putin stole the election”—and also satisfies the many in Congress, the intelligence community, and the media who are opposed to any détente with Moscow. It all looks and smells good because key evidence comes from outside the system and doesn’t appear to derive from dedicated players harboring agendas on this side of the Atlantic. Pull it all together and it accomplishes three things: it enables an investigation of Flynn, provides cover for media leaks, and both embarrasses and weakens the authority of the new administration.

Yes, I know this is largely speculation, but former colleagues and I have come to suspect something does not smell right with the Hannigan resignation and would seem to be quite plausibly related to Flynn. It also explains how and why the investigation proceeded as aggressively as it did: information derived from a major foreign intelligence partner could not be easily dismissed or ignored and would have to be acted upon.

Hannigan’s exit is almost certainly more than it seems, and the Flynn dismissal also would appear to have aspects that have not yet surfaced and, in truth, might never see the light of day.

It is not unreasonable to argue that it can all be connected. Aggrieved senior officials closely tied to the outgoing White House might have surreptitiously sought assistance from a “special relationship friend” in a foreign government to make a case that would humiliate and ultimately bring down an unlovable and abrasive incoming national-security advisor. Of course, one still needs to learn who those senior officials were and consider whether they should be allowed to walk away from what they have done.

As for Hannigan, did the Trump White House discover what had occurred and did it back channel to British Prime Minister Theresa May demanding that someone’s head roll? Or did May learn of the maneuvering independently and respond appropriately? However it is playing out right now, someday the whole story almost certainly will be leaked and whatever contrivance or sequence of events enabled the attack on Flynn will become public. You can be sure of that.

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