

# More than a Movie, The Featured Assassination Plot directed against Kim Jong-un. “The Interview” and the Sony Hack

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*Does Pyongyang have such clout that a US-made film can actually be pulled from official release? That is normally the province reserved for local censors, certainly not hackers given a political mission. Those behind The Interview, including Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg, must have found it all a touch bemusing. But even more significantly, the tables were turned on a film that featured an assassination plot directed at a living leader, the very much in office Kim Jong-un, albeit dressed up in the form of a comedy.*

The saga began when it became clear that Sony Pictures had been the object of an alleged cyber attack by the so-called Guardians of Peace. A trove of emails was made available, featuring, as screenwriter and novelist Clancy Sigal explained, “a marvellous study in how pictures actually get made, with plenty of bile, frustration, cross purposes, doublecrosses, misunderstandings and second thoughts” (CounterPunch, Dec 22). It was ego triumphant.

Screenwriter Aaron Sorkin was less enthusiastic, seeing such material as evidence of how media has given “material aid to criminals.” Pity the small army of Sony employees caught in this crossfire. “Wouldn’t it be a movie moment if the other studios invoked the NATO rule and denounced the attack on Sony as an attack on all of us, and our bedrock belief in free expression?” Unlikely – Hollywood behaviour is not governed by provisions of collective self-defence, however much Sorkin wished it were so.

Then came the flurry of accusations. On Friday, the US President decided that enough was enough. The trail, Obama suggested, led to needling emissaries of the DPRK – or at least, that is what his security advisors were telling him. North Korean authorities deemed the accusation that it has initiated the attacks as “groundless slander” and suggested, rather cheekily, that a joint investigation be made. In the words of a North Korean spokesman, “We propose to conduct a joint investigation with the US in response to groundless slander being perpetrated by the US by mobilising public opinion.”

Sony’s own explanations for its conduct have been something to behold. They did not “cave in”, and in any case, even if they did, they did so tactically. Chief Executive Michael Lynton has suggested alternative platforms for releasing the film.

What has tended to be under-emphasised in this unfolding off screen drama is the political feed that has gone into The Interview. An exaggerated rage over the issue of free speech has also featured. Take Amy Nicholson in the LA Weekly (Dec 17): “Let’s be clear: Cancelling the Christmas Day opening of The Interview is cowardly.” Blame the theatre chains – AMC, Regal, Cinemark, Carmike and Cineplex – all of whom got cold feet at threats

that the opening night would see a terror storm. As a result, “we’ve hobbled our nation’s commitment to free speech in ways we may never see”.

Interferences with the internal affairs of a state can take on various forms, even if it is framed as a “free speech” matter that sees the head of a sitting leader explode. (Advocates of this line point to a range of films, often in the Frederick Forsyth mould, which feature a string of assassination plots, ignoring the contemporaneous nature of the current subject.)

A closer look at the response to the DPRK’s attack suggests that Pyongyang may well have had good reason to be peeved. After all, a film from the other side of the fence featuring the assassination of President Obama, however humorous, might have seen every good office in the US used to frustrate its release.

The political stake in the film was never in doubt. Sony chief Michael Lynton went so far as to get a Rand Corporation senior analyst to cast his eyes over *The Interview*, a somewhat serious gesture despite the comedic thrust of the script. Given Lynton’s presence on the Rand board of trustees, Bennett proved to be a convenient consultant. So much, then, for the purity of the free speech matter.

Bennett was happy to speculate that the film would have had internal political consequences. “I think it should be released. Once [Kim Jong-un’s] elites see it, it’s going to have some effect and it’s not going to be good for him. I think that’s what, in the end, they were really trying to stop by stopping the release of the film” (Deadline, Dec 19).

Bennett’s conclusion on seeing the film? “I told [Lynton] I thought it was coarse, that it was over the top in some areas, but that I thought the depiction of Kim Jong-un was a picture that needed to get into North Korea.” Bennett skirts over the obvious point that such “information operations” have fared poorly in the hermit state.

While the accusations at this point remain mired in uncertain certainties countering other forms of certainty, the legal analysts have been heading for the books to see what form of provocation the attack could be deemed. The general sense: not quite one of war, though cyber attacks have assumed importance in military manuals as potentially destructive acts.

For all of that, it is the North Koreans who are racking up the points, despite Obama’s rather flailing attempt to identify a “proportional response”. Pyongyang has shown that it can pack quite an asymmetric punch if its interests are impugned. The United States, in contrast, has a greater spread of targets, a huge underbelly awaiting to be slit. This has put something of a dampener on prospective retaliation against the comparatively cyber poor country.

As David Sanger, Nicole Perlroth and Eric Schmitt of the New York Times (Dec 20) note, there is “concern over the risk of escalation with North Korea since the United States has far more vulnerable targets, from its power grid to its financial markets than North Korea.”

There is also the Chinese dimension. Beijing’s help is being sought, as much of the DPRK’s telecommunications runs through China. Such help from Beijing will invariably be qualified, given Washington’s own concerns about previous Chinese attacks on its cyber infrastructure. Five Chinese hackers working for the PLA were indicted by the US Justice Department in May on charges of industrial espionage. Any formed pact is bound to be Mephistophelean in nature. The empire has been ambushed, and the regime in Pyongyang may have some moment, if only briefly, to gloat.

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