

CIA Evidence from Whistleblower Trial Could Tilt Iran Nuclear Talks

By [Norman Solomon](#)
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A month after former CIA officer Jeffrey Sterling was convicted on nine felony counts with [circumstantial metadata](#), the zealous prosecution is now having potentially major consequences — casting doubt on the credibility of claims by the U.S. government that Iran has developed a nuclear weapons program.

With negotiations between Iran and the United States at a pivotal stage, fallout from the trial's revelations about the CIA's Operation Merlin is likely to cause the International Atomic Energy Agency to re-examine U.S. assertions that Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons.

In its zeal to prosecute Sterling for allegedly leaking classified information about Operation Merlin — which provided flawed nuclear weapon design information to Iran in 2000 — the U.S. government has damaged its own standing with the IAEA. The trial made public a treasure trove of information about the Merlin operation.

Last week Bloomberg News [reported](#) from Vienna, where IAEA is headquartered, that the agency “will probably review intelligence they received about Iran as a result of the revelations, said the two diplomats who are familiar with the IAEA's Iran file and asked not to be named because the details are confidential.”

The Bloomberg dispatch, which matter-of-factly referred to Merlin as a “sting” operation, quoted a former British envoy to the IAEA, Peter Jenkins, saying: “This story suggests a possibility that hostile intelligence agencies could decide to plant a ‘smoking gun’ in Iran for the IAEA to find. That looks like a big problem.”

After sitting through the seven-day Sterling trial, I don't recall that the government or any of its witnesses — including 23 from the CIA as well as former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice — ever referred to Operation Merlin as a “sting.” Instead, it was consistently [portrayed](#) as an effort to send Iran down the wrong technical path. In fact, over the years, Operation Merlin may have been both.

Near the end of the Clinton administration, CIA documents released at the trial show, Merlin was a botched effort to screw up Iran's nuclear program. (There is no evidence that Iran's government took the bait.) But documents also show that Merlin continued for years, with the CIA considering plans to widen the operation beyond Iran.

As a matter of fact, one CIA document was not redacted sufficiently to hide [evident interest](#) in also trying a similar tactic against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. History certainly tells us that the Bush-Cheney administration would be capable of seeking to cite

fabricated evidence in a push to justify military action against a targeted country.

Investigative journalist Marcy Wheeler, my colleague at ExposeFacts, has written an extensive analysis of the latest developments. The article on her EmptyWheel blog raises key questions beginning with the headline "[What Was the CIA Really Doing with Merlin by 2003?](#)"

An emerging big irony of *United States of America v. Jeffrey Alexander Sterling* is that the government has harmed itself in the process of gunning for the defendant. While the prosecution used innuendos and weak circumstantial evidence to obtain guilty verdicts on multiple felonies, the trial produced no actual evidence that Sterling leaked classified information. But the trial did provide abundant evidence that the U.S. government's nuclear-related claims about Iran should not be trusted.

In the courtroom, one CIA witness after another described Operation Merlin as a vitally important program requiring strict secrecy. Yet the government revealed a great deal of information about Operation Merlin during the trial — including CIA documents that showed the U.S. government to be committed to deception about the Iranian nuclear program. If, as a result, the International Atomic Energy Agency concludes that U.S. assertions about an alleged Iranian nuclear weapons program lack credibility, top officials in Washington will have themselves to blame.

Norman Solomon is the executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy and the author of "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death." He is a co-founder of RootsAction.org.

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