

# Cracking Down on Truth-Telling: Obama is “the Greatest Enemy to Press Freedom in a Generation”

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President Barack Obama, with Vice President Joe Biden, attends a meeting in the Roosevelt Room of the White House, Dec. 12, 2013. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

*President Obama entered office vowing to run a transparent government. But instead he has clamped down on leaks, prosecuted whistleblowers and threatened truth-telling journalists with jail if they don't reveal sources.*

Last week focused a lot of attention on *New York Times* reporter James Risen, who is facing the threat of jail time for refusing to testify in a leak case against former CIA officer Jeffrey Sterling. The Supreme Court [refused](#) to hear Risen's appeal of a subpoena to testify in June.

A week ago, a bunch of fellow Pulitzer Prize winners [signed a statement](#) supporting Risen. On Thursday, a coalition of press freedom groups [submitted](#) 100,000 signatures calling on DOJ to halt its pursuit of Risen's testimony. In an interview with Maureen Dowd after a press conference on press freedom on Thursday, Risen [called](#) President Barack Obama, “the greatest enemy to press freedom in a generation.”

Meanwhile, even as Risen waits to find out whether the Department of Justice will send him to jail to attempt to force him to testify about his source, Sterling also waits, as he has since January 2011, when he was first arrested. The government has done nothing official in Sterling's case since the Supreme Court refusal to take Risen's appeal in June.

Sterling is [accused](#) of providing Risen classified information regarding Operation Merlin, a bungled CIA effort to deal Iran bad nuclear weapons information. The information appeared in Chapter 9 of Risen's 2006 book, *State of War*, which exposed a number of the Bush Administration's ill-considered intelligence programs.

Risen's account revealed not just that CIA tried to thwart nuclear proliferation by dealing doctored nuclear blueprints to American adversaries, but that in this case, the Russian defector the U.S. charged with dealing the blueprints to Iran told them the blueprints were flawed. In other words, Risen's story — for which Sterling is one alleged source — demonstrated questionable judgment and dangerously incompetent execution by the CIA, all in an effort to thwart Iran's purported nuclear weapons program.

Sterling's story, then, makes an instructive contrast with that of retired General James Cartwright, who is alleged by the press, but not yet — publicly at least — by the government, to have served as the source for another story about the intelligence community's questionable judgment and dangerously incompetent execution of counter-proliferation plots targeting Iran.

Over a year ago, NBC [reported](#) that General Cartwright had received a target letter informing him he was under investigation as the source for [one of David Sanger's stories](#) on U.S.-Israeli efforts to stall Iran's enrichment program with the StuxNet cyberattack:

"According to legal sources, Retired Marine Gen. James 'Hoss' Cartwright, the former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has received a target letter informing him that he's under investigation for allegedly leaking information about a massive attack using a computer virus named Stuxnet on Iran's nuclear facilities. Gen. Cartwright, 63, becomes the latest individual targeted over alleged leaks by the Obama administration, which has already prosecuted or charged eight individuals under the Espionage Act. ...

"As soon as the Times report appeared, Congressional leaders demanded a criminal probe, and President Obama said he had 'zero tolerance' for 'these kinds of leaks.' Republicans charged that senior administration officials had leaked the details to bolster the president's national security credentials during the 2012 campaign.

"But, said legal sources, while the probe that Attorney General Eric Holder ordered initially focused on whether the information came from inside the White House, by late last year FBI agents were zeroing in on Cartwright, who had served as one of the president's 'inner circle' of national security advisors. Two sources said prosecutors were able to identify Cartwright as a suspected leaker without resorting to a secret subpoena of the phone records of New York Times reporters.

"One source familiar with the probe said the Justice Department has not made a final decision on whether to charge Cartwright."

Subsequent reports [revealed](#) Cartwright was stripped of his security clearance sometime last year.

The story for which Cartwright allegedly served as a source did not expose StuxNet - cybersecurity firm Kaspersky Lab did that. Nor was it Sanger's first story confirming U.S. and Israeli involvement; in 2011 he partnered with other *New York Times* journalists [to provide details](#) on U.S. and Israeli collaboration on the attacks.

Sanger's 2012 story provided new details, including that Obama approved an escalation of the StuxNet attack even after it had escaped beyond its target at Iran's Natanz centrifuge facility lab. Perhaps even more sensitive, Sanger's story relayed claims from officials attending a presidential briefing suggesting that Israel had been responsible for the code escaping Natanz:

"An error in the code, they said, had led it to spread to an engineer's computer when it was hooked up to the centrifuges. When the engineer left Natanz and connected the computer to the Internet, the American- and Israeli-made bug failed to recognize that its environment had changed. It began replicating itself all around the world. Suddenly, the code was exposed, though its intent would not be clear, at least to ordinary computer users.

"'We think there was a modification done by the Israelis,' one of the briefers told the president, 'and we don't know if we were part of that activity.'

"Mr. Obama, according to officials in the room, asked a series of questions, fearful that the code could do damage outside the plant. The answers came

back in hedged terms. Mr. Biden fumed. 'It's got to be the Israelis,' he said. 'They went too far.'"

Sanger's StuxNet story is, then, just like Risen's account of Merlin, a story of the dangerous unintended consequences caused by covert U.S. efforts to combat Iran's claimed nuclear program. Both are issues the American public deserves to debate. Should the U.S. risk further proliferation in its effort to counter proliferation? Should NSA launch offensive attacks against an adversary we're not at war with? What kind of blowback do such operations invite?

Both stories have been critical to bringing necessary public attention to the bungling behind our Iran policy. Yet the alleged leakers in the two stories have thus far been treated differently. Sterling has been fighting prosecution for 3.5 years. Cartwright has lost his security clearance but, two years after the Sanger story, DOJ has not charged him or anyone else.

There may be any number of explanations for the apparently different treatment: DOJ may still be crafting a case against Cartwright — and we may all be defending Sanger's right to protect his sources sometime in the future. Given the sensitivities of StuxNet, DOJ may be unable to prosecute the leak without exposing even more classified information.

Cartwright's different treatment may reflect DOJ's efforts — [announced last year](#) — to "explore ways in which the intelligence agencies themselves, in the first instance, can address information leaks internally, though administrative means, such as the withdrawal of security clearances."

Then there's the possibility that if you're "[Obama's favorite general](#)," as Cartwright reportedly was, you don't get prosecuted. Unlike Cartwright, Jeffrey Sterling didn't sit in on White House briefings. On the contrary, the government [claimed](#) Sterling only leaked this information after losing an Equal Employment Opportunity suit against the CIA, in which he claimed he had not been given certain assignments because he is African-American. In fact, as Risen reported in a [2002 story](#) on Sterling, CIA Director John Brennan — then the Agency's deputy executive director — played a role in denying Sterling's claim, after which the CIA subjected Sterling to an early security investigation.

Both Risen's and Sanger's stories provided citizens important information on America's ham-handed efforts to combat Iran. Both leaks served to provide important information about the ill-considered covert actions done in our name. Thus far, the leaks have not been treated the same.

Hopefully, the inaction on Sterling's case and against Cartwright — if he is, indeed, Sanger's source — reflects reconsideration on the part of the Obama Administration of its counterproductive criminalization of whistleblowing. Hopefully, what we're seeing is a belated recognition that attacking journalism doesn't serve the country.

But for now, Jeffrey Sterling and James Risen remain under direct threat from DOJ for telling us just how problematic some of CIA's programs against Iran are.

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