

Ex-CIA officer charged with leak to Times reporter. CIA Gave Iran Nuclear Blueprints?

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Theme: [Intelligence](#)

Global Research, January 21, 2011

msnbc.msn.com 21 January 2011

The Justice Department on Thursday charged a former CIA clandestine officer with leaking classified information about a secret U.S. effort to disrupt Iran's nuclear program to New York Times reporter James Risen.

Jeffrey Alexander Sterling, who served in the CIA between 1993 and 2002, was arrested by the FBI in St. Louis Thursday and charged in a 10-count indictment with disclosing national defense information and obstruction of justice. At his arraignment later in the day, U.S. Magistrate Judge Terry I. Adelman told him he would be detained through the weekend because the government had declared him a danger to the community. Another detention hearing was scheduled for 2 p.m. Monday.

The case involves the disclosure in Risen's 2006 book, "State of War," of a CIA program called "Operation Merlin." Risen described it as a botched attempt under the Clinton administration to sabotage Iran's nuclear program by giving flawed blueprints for key components to a Russian nuclear scientist who had defected. The idea was that the Russian scientist, who was covertly working for the CIA, would feed the flawed designs to the Iranians. But according to the book, the CIA's efforts went awry when the scientist got nervous and instead tipped off the Iranians to the flaws in the designs. According to Risen, this ended up helping Iran "accelerate its weapon development." The CIA has always insisted that Risen's reporting was "inaccurate."

The indictment essentially charges Sterling with leaking to Risen information about the Iranian program in retaliation for the handling of an employment discrimination case he filed against the CIA. It states that Sterling, who worked in the CIA between May 1993 and January 2002, had served for part of that time as the chief operations officer handling a "human asset" in a program related to the weapons capabilities of a foreign country.

Then in April 2003, according to the indictment, Risen contacted the CIA's public affairs director to say that he planned to write a story about the classified program. That prompted U.S. government officials to meet with Risen and representatives of the Times about the "national security implications" of publishing such information. The Times never published Risen's story. A senior government official familiar with the case told NBC that Condoleezza Rice, then national security advisor under President George W. Bush, was among those who urged the Times not to publish Risen's information.

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