

# US “Sparked Russian Spy Sensation” in the Wake of WikiLeaks Broadside

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In an effort to distract attention from the release of thousands of secret documents on the Afghanistan War, the US rounded up 11 Russian “spies” according to internal sources.

Just weeks after being hung out to dry after getting branded in the US media spin machine as “spies”, the wrist-slapped Russians are back in Moscow, where “their future looks bright,” Prime Minister Vladimir Putin assured them.

Anna Chapman, for example, whose perky good looks were enhanced by an alluring cloak-and-dagger lifestyle that never seemed to get more exciting than a trip to the local coffee shop, suddenly acquired enough star collateral to reject an invitation by actress Angelina Jolie to the Russian premiere of the film “Salt”, in which Brad’s better half plays – all too surreally in light of recent events – a suspected Russian spy.

But it gets better. Below the vapid veneer of this shoddy spy script, which more resembled a commercialized Hollywood film trailer than any real-life espionage case, experts and analysts were practically screaming: “Where is the ‘bleeping’ story, and why did it break now, especially when Russian President Dmitry Medvedev had just met with US President Barack Obama for the upbeat ‘Cheeseburger Summit’ at Ray’s Hell Burger in Arlington, Virginia?”

Good question. After all, the reason provided by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for explaining when they moved against Team Russia when they did is not terribly convincing.

In a nutshell, the FBI said it was concerned that their “deep cover” Russian spies would suddenly disappear into the fabric of American suburbia, with their children and dogs in tow, once word got out that an undercover agent, posing as a Russian embassy employee – donning Groucho Marx trick glasses, no doubt – had met with Miss Chapman with a request that she deliver a forged passport to another individual.

Miss Chapman, however, expertly imitating any law-abiding American citizen, duly reported the incident to the New York City Police. So now the FBI is worried that their “deep cover” Russian spy ring, which they wasted a full decade of taxpayer dollars trailing across American suburbia, would suddenly disappear like Alice down the rabbit hole.

But this is the 21st Century, and we live amidst an iron matrix of technological contraptions that do not make an escape across the great American frontier a very easy prospect, even for seasoned spies. So then why did the dragnet drop around the reckless Russians when it did?

The real reason, it seems, has a lot to do with a former computer hacker by the name of Julian Assange, who first grabbed headlines in April when he posted on his WikiLeaks website horrific video grabs of US soldiers aboard an Apache helicopter in Baghdad (July 2007) gunning down 12 civilians, including two Reuters reporters.

The soldiers were under the impression, the Pentagon explained, that they were targeting armed militants. Whatever the case may be, the Apache crew's callous cheering following the incident dealt US forces another public relations disaster on the home front.

Welcome to WikiLeaks

Around the same time that his shocking Iraqi video was burning down the Internet, Assange poked the wasps' nest a bit deeper by making the stunning announcement that he had acquired some 90,000 secret documents detailing every move by the US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan. In other words, a very big can of worms that made Washington wriggle in terrible discomfort.

The White House, however, had ample time to prepare for this latest WikiLeaks broadside, and this is when the sensational Russian spy was allegedly hatched, according to several defense experts.

"The White House understood it needed something really big to distract attention away from what was coming down the pipe," said a former embassy diplomat who now works with a major US defense contractor, speaking on the condition of anonymity. "There was really no need for the FBI to round up those Russians when they did unless there was some higher purpose. And that purpose...was the threat that Assange would release documents that would be extremely damaging to the war effort in Afghanistan."

The War in Afghanistan, which began on October 7, 2001, pits some 150,000 NATO coalition forces against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, and about a dozen other ragtag militant outfits. The United States makes up the overwhelming bulk of the troop presence, yet plans to begin handing over large parts of the military operation to Afghanistan elements of the security apparatus, which has been riddled with subversive elements from the very beginning.

While saying that he believed that the suspected Russian spies were in the United States for "illegitimate purposes," the US defense contractor, who maintains regular contacts with diplomatic circles, said that the Russians were conveniently used as "decoys to attract the hunters away from the approaching larger target."

But Julian Assange was not the only hot potato that Washington was forced to handle at very short notice.

Another US government source, who also refused to be identified due to her proximity to the on-going investigation, offered a different take on the Russian spy case, alluding to the mysterious disappearance of an Iranian nuclear scientist, who turned up on American soil this month claiming that he had been abducted by US intelligence.

Last June, Shahram Amiri, who worked at Tehran's Malek Ashtar University, which is closely connected to Iran's Revolutionary Guard, disappeared in Saudi Arabia during a pilgrimage. Original reports said that he had met with US intelligence officials and agreed to resettle in

the United States. The US hailed the defection of the scientist an “intelligence coup.”

Whether Amiri had trouble adjusting to his new neighborhood is not clear, but in July he turned up in Iran, claiming that he had been “abducted and tortured” in the United States. Earlier statements by Amiri on the Internet suggest that he was in the US on his own accord. US officials, meanwhile, said that the Iranian was always free to go.

“Let me say that Mr. Amiri has been in the United States of his own free will. And he is free to go,” Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State told reporters at the headquarters of the State Department.

“Personally, I think this case [of the missing Iranian scientist] was far more troubling for Washington than what has appeared on WikiLeaks,” the veteran diplomat said in an email. “You have to remember that much of what he [Julian Assange] posted on his website was not that damaging, aside from the reports that Pakistan was working with the Taliban behind the scenes. But the US already suspected that there have been such isolated incidences in the past.”

The diplomat then further downplayed the significance of the WikiLeaks documents, arguing that they covered the period January 2004 and December 2009, the period when events in Afghanistan would have fallen on George W. Bush’s watch.

“Essentially, the Obama White House is furious about the release [of the secret military documents] not because it makes their military efforts look bad, but because they represent a serious breach of national security,” she said. “These events did not happen on Barack Obama’s watch, but on George Bush’s, yet that still does not give the White House reason to celebrate.”

Although the above interviews with US diplomats failed to produce any hard evidence that the Russian spy case was stirred up to deter attention away from the real action, their own personal conversations with high-ranking officials suggest this was a strong possibility.

Indeed, there is almost no other way to explain all of the dust that had been kicked up around the Russian “spies” who had precious few tales to tell.

Perhaps we will just have to wait for the next WikiLeaks release to set the record straight.

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