

FEBRUARY 26

Spying at the UN and the evasions of journalism

Tony Blair and George W. Bush want the issue of spying at the United Nations to go away. That's one of the reasons the Blair government ended its prosecution of whistleblower Katharine Gun on Wednesday (Feb. 25). But within 24 hours, the scandal of U.N. spying exploded further when one of Blair's former cabinet ministers said that British spies closely monitored conversations of U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan during the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq last year.

The new allegations, which have the ring of truth, are now coming from ex-secretary of international development Clare Short. "I have seen transcripts of Kofi Annan's conversations," she said in an interview with BBC Radio. "In fact I have had conversations with Kofi in the run-up to war thinking 'Oh dear, there will be a transcript of this and people will see what he and I are saying.'" Short added that British intelligence had been explicitly directed to spy on Annan and other top U.N. officials.

Few can doubt that some major British news outlets will thoroughly dig below the surface of Short's charges. But on the other side of the Atlantic, the journalistic evasion on the subject of U.N. spying has been so extreme that we can have no confidence in the mainstream media's inclination to adequately cover this new bombshell.

For 51 weeks – from the day that the Observer newspaper in London broke the news about spying at the United Nations until the moment that British prosecutors dropped charges against Gun on Wednesday – major news outlets in the United States almost completely ignored the story.

The Observer's expose, under the headline "Revealed: U.S. Dirty Tricks to Win Vote on Iraq War," came 18 days before the invasion of Iraq began. By unveiling a top secret U.S. National Security Agency memo, the newspaper provided key information when it counted most: before the war started.

That NSA memo outlined surveillance of a half-dozen delegations with swing votes on the U.N. Security Council, noting a focus on "the whole gamut of information that could give U.S. policy-makers an edge in obtaining results favorable to U.S. goals" – support for war on Iraq.

The memo said that the agency had started a "surge" of spying on U.N. diplomats, including wiretaps of home and office telephones along with reading of e-mails.

Three days after the story came out, I asked for an assessment from the man who gave the Pentagon Papers to journalists in 1971. Daniel Ellsberg responded: "This leak is more timely and potentially more important than the Pentagon Papers . . . Truth-telling like this can stop a war.

But even though – or perhaps especially because – the memo was from the U.S. government and showed that Washington was spying on U.N. diplomats, the big American media showed scant interest. The coverage was either shoddy or non-existent.

A year ago, at the brink of war, the New York Times did not cover the U.N. spying revelation. Nearly 96 hours after the Observer had reported it, I called Times deputy foreign editor Alison Smale and asked why not. "We would normally expect to do our own intelligence reporting," Smale replied. She added that "we could get no confirmation or comment." In other words, U.S. intelligence officials refused to confirm or discuss the memo – so the Times did not see fit to report on it.

The Washington Post didn't do much better. It printed a 514-word article on a back page with the headline "Spying Report No Shock to U.N." Meanwhile, the Los Angeles Times published a longer piece emphasizing from the outset that U.S. spy activities at the United Nations are "long-standing." For good measure, the piece reported "some experts suspected that it could be a forgery" – and "several former top intelligence officials said they were skeptical of the memo's authenticity."

Within days, any doubt about the memo's "authenticity" was gone. The British media reported that the U.K. government had arrested an unnamed female employee at a British intelligence agency in connection with the leak.

By then, however, the spotty coverage in the mainstream U.S. press had disappeared. In fact – except for a high-quality detailed news story by a pair of Baltimore Sun reporters that appeared in that newspaper on March 4 – there isn't an example of mainstream U.S. news reporting on the story last year that's worthy of any pride.

In mid-November, for the first time, Katharine Gun's name became public when the British press reported that she'd been formally charged with violating the draconian Official Secrets Act. Appearing briefly at court proceedings, she was a beacon of moral clarity. Disclosure of the NSA memo, Gun said, was "necessary to prevent an illegal war in which thousands of Iraqi civilians and British soldiers would be killed or maimed." And: "I have only ever followed my conscience."

A search of the comprehensive LexisNexis database finds that for nearly three months after Katharine Gun's name first appeared in the British media, U.S. news stories mentioning her scarcely existed. When Gun's name did appear in U.S. dailies it was almost always on an opinion page. News sections were oblivious: Again with the notable exception of the Baltimore Sun (which ran an in-depth news article about Gun and Ellsberg on Feb. 1), mainstream U.S. news departments proceeded as though Katharine Gun were a non-person. She only became "newsworthy" after charges were dropped.

"Mr. Blair's spokesmen were conspicuously silent on Wednesday, apparently hopeful that the case would disappear from the public agenda," the New York Times reported in Thursday's paper. But the case had never been on the public agenda as far as the Times news department was concerned.

Overall, the matter of Washington's spying at the United Nations has been off the American media map until February. Whether the major U.S. news outlets will do a better job on the subject this spring remains to be seen. But it would be a mistake to assume that they will.

Although the prosecution of Gun has ended, the issue of U.N. spying has not. At stake is the integrity of a world body that should not tolerate intrusive abuses by the government of its host country.

We can assume that Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, a former Mexican ambassador to the United Nations, did not speak lightly when he made a strong statement that appeared in an Associated Press dispatch from Mexico City on Feb. 12: "They are violating the U.N. headquarters covenant." He was referring to officials of the U.S. government.

That statement now resonates more loudly than ever. With British and American intelligence agencies working closely together, both have been locked in a shamefully duplicitous embrace. In the interests of war, their nefarious activities served as direct counterpoints to the deceptions coming from 10 Downing Street and the White House. In the interests of journalism, reporters should now pursue truth wherever it might lead.

(Background about the Gun case has been posted at www.accuracy.org/gun, a web page of the Institute for Public Accuracy, where my colleagues and I have worked to make information available about the U.N. spying story.)