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LOOSE LIPS ENABLE TERRORISTS

Safeguard sources and methods. Or wish that you had.

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. “Where the first one was very clean relative to sources and methods, my initial cut is [this one is a lot less clean](#).” By “the first one” White House Chief of Staff John Kelly meant a [memo](#) authored by the Republican majority of the [House intelligence committee](#) accusing the FBI of purposely misusing [FISA](#), a legal tool for investigating terrorist plots hatched from abroad, so as to gather dirt on then-candidate Trump. While confirming that his Party’s missive safeguarded vital secrets, Kelly worried that “this one,” meaning the response by the committee’s Democratic members (it essentially called the Republicans liars) contained sensitive intelligence information.

Well, [after a few redactions](#) to protect “sources and methods” the Democrats released [their Opus](#) as well. We’ll leave it to the reader to analyze the dueling memoranda and decide whether FISA was really abused. But here we’re more interested in the “sources and methods” whose protection Kelly supposedly sought. Just what *are* those things?

“Sources” are where information exists. That includes people, places and things. “Methods” – what spies call “tradecraft” – signifies the techniques, such as physical and electronic surveillance, that investigators use to develop leads. Criminals are naturally eager to devise countermeasures. In the good old days that meant watching for a tail or shooting out a nasty old bank camera. But those have been miniaturized and are now ubiquitous, so avoiding them is difficult. On the other hand, improvements in encryption technology, which interferes with the Government’s ability to access electronic communications, has led to its epic, ongoing struggle with service providers who are reluctant for commercial reasons to provide “keys” that can, say, unlock cellphones.

Kelly, the immediate past head of Homeland Security, would undoubtedly agree that, if nothing else, it’s important to keep potential terrorists ignorant, or as ignorant as possible, of how police go about their business. So he would probably be miffed that a fellow Government kingpin recently spilled the beans during the [Austin bombings](#). And it wasn’t just *any* kingpin.

To begin, let’s summarize what’s known. Between March 2 and March 20 Austin resident Mark Conditt shipped five package bombs through commercial carriers and left another behind on the street. Five devices ultimately detonated, killing two persons and

injuring four. Days later, as cops closed in, Conditt set off a last bomb in his car, killing himself and injuring an officer who approached.

Remarkably, no one knows what drove an apparently “normal” 23-year old to commit these barbarous acts. [A confession](#) left behind on a cellphone offered an apology but no explanation other than his admission to being a “psychopath.” [Conditt had been fired](#) from his last job for poor performance. However, his boss called the young man “smart” and said that he had shown “a lot of promise.”

Authorities have yet to agree on whether Conditt was a “terrorist.” Austin’s police chief implied no. His conclusion [was vigorously disputed](#) by the editors of the local paper, the *Austin Statesman*, who pointed to “the fear these attacks inflicted on an entire city.” Fatuous distinctions aside (you can read about attempts to define terrorism [here](#)), cloaking bombs as everyday objects seems no less frightening for the lack of an articulated ideological agenda. In our brave new Amazonian economy, where goods of all kinds wind up on one’s doorstep, the threat of having a package blow up in your face could bring things to a screeching halt. Whatever Conditt’s motives, we would definitely call him a “terrorist.”

As one would expect, authorities responded vigorously. Good investigative work kept casualties down and brought the deplorable episode to a relatively swift conclusion. Unfortunately, the specific sources and methods the good guys (and girls) used to chase Conditt down were leaked to journalists and made public through a series of highly detailed, compelling articles in national and local media. Copycats and plotters, at least those who can read, will undoubtedly find them useful for maximizing casualties and avoiding detection the next time around.

These unfortunate disclosures came in two installments: before Conditt blew himself up, and after. One day preceding his capture [the New York Times whined](#) that officials were being “tight-lipped about the details of the case.” So for that piece reporters turned elsewhere. Their stool pigeons included a “federal agent and explosives expert who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media” as well as two well-known pundits, former Boston police commissioner Ed Davis and retired FBI profiler Clinton Van Zandt. While these sources said little about the current investigation they provided compelling detail about how device reconstruction, shrapnel analysis and bomber behavior can help police identify suspects and track them down.

To this former ATF agent, that was bad enough, though not unforgivably so. After all, he once taught a course on criminal investigation at Cal State Fullerton. But immediately after Conditt’s death the media fully shed its gloves, publishing extensive,

highly detailed accounts of precisely how the Feds and cops identified and pursued Conditt. We won't publish extracts here, but if you're hankering to be disgusted check out these pieces in the [New York Times](#) and [Austin Statesman](#).

Of course, these "how-to" guides for terrorism didn't originate with on-the-record releases by agency PIO's. According to the *Times* its sources included anonymous "investigators," an unnamed member of "federal law enforcement" and "political leaders" whose positions entitled them to official briefings. Surprisingly, one of these lawmakers was identified. Astoundingly, he turned out to be the [Hon. Michael McCaul](#), Chair of the House Homeland Security Committee, most recently John Kelly's political overseer. By virtue of his position Congressman McCaul should have known far, far better than to carelessly blab about sources and methods. But he did. We're loath to repeat what he said, but curious readers can refer to the above-linked article in the *Times* and to a second story in the [Statesman](#).

What's to be done? As your blogger discovered early during his Federal career, good reporters are every bit as bright, inquisitive and, yes, *pushy* as the best criminal investigator. After all, neither they nor their employers can prosper in the unforgiving, highly competitive media market without producing tangible results. So forget about changing them. First, focus *within*. Counsel and train all who are privy to criminal casework to keep sources and methods close to the chest. Then counsel and train them again. Require that media inquiries about sensitive matters and breaking events be referred to PIO's. Most importantly, be sure that your outreach includes members of the political class, who benefit from favorable press coverage and may give little thought to the ill effects of sharing a juicy morsel (or two, or three) with a friendly reporter. And by all means look on pundits for the plague they are.

To be sure, people have a right to be informed. They also have the right not to be blown up. By all means let's find a happy medium before the next psychopath strikes.