

THE SHUTDOWN AND THE SPY

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COMMENTARY

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Author's Note:

The following story is a fictitious depiction of a plausible scenario that is meant to illustrate the real damage done to critical intelligence collection when the U.S. government shuts down. Political leaders go out of their way to emphasize that the military will remain on duty. But other federal employees crucial to U.S. national security are furloughed, including most CIA operations officers at home and abroad, along with the rest of civilian employees in the intelligence community and colleagues in the State Department, the Department of Defense,

and across the government. With the federal government briefly shutting down Friday morning for the second time in as many months, it's worth considering the national security risks of closing the doors.

During the 2013 government shutdown, the U.S. intelligence community furloughed 72 percent of its civilian employees. A spokesman for the Director of National Intelligence asserted, "The Intelligence Community's ability to identify threats and provide information for a broad set of national security decisions will be diminished for the duration. The immediate and significant reduction in employees on the job means that we will assume greater risk and our ability to support emerging intelligence requirements will be curtailed." Dianne Feinstein, then-Chairwoman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, put it bluntly: "Our shutdown is the biggest gift we could possibly give our enemies."

When the government re-opens, it is not just a few days that have been lost. It is not back to business as usual with a slight delay. By a conservative estimate, dozens of clandestine partners will have missed important meetings with their case officers during a three-day window, and the U.S. government may have forfeited hundreds of important intelligence reports. Political antics on both sides of the aisle can hurt the U.S. security posture and strategic decision-making, and even make our partners question America's seriousness and capabilities as a superpower. As you read, put yourself in Gregory's shoes, and consider his perspective on the risks he takes for a country that seems increasingly unable to govern itself.

Sunday, Jan. 21, 2018. Overseas.

From his new top floor office in the embassy, just down the hall from the ambassador, Gregory was enjoying the stunning mountain view that accompanied his recent promotion to the senior ranks of the foreign ministry, even if it meant working on a weekend. It was well earned, Gregory's colleagues told him, and it rang true to him. Promotions in the ministry were increasingly based on greasing the skids of illicit trade deals, but Gregory hadn't used his connections in this country to get anyone rich. He was an experienced diplomat

with a dozen years of challenging and occasionally dangerous assignments under his belt. His current portfolio, “America Strategy,” was the envy of his colleagues — finally a chance to play in the big game against the real adversary. But Gregory also felt its weight. A glance at his wall map showed the location of several U.S. military installations not far from where he sat.

Like many diplomats on overseas postings, he had missed his share of family commitments when duty called, and he felt a pang of guilt when he thought about leaving his family back home, hundreds of miles away, so his only daughter could receive continued medical treatment. That’s what his boss said was for the best when informing Gregory that his family would not be joining him abroad this time around. He didn’t see why not. After all, there was a family housing complex, an international school, and competent medical personnel in the new country where he’d be posted. His family had never felt more like collateral to him. He worried about them constantly and sent home every paycheck. Inflation was getting worse, thanks to the bumbling of the kleptocrats who now ran his home country. The economic conditions hit his parents as well, and their state pensions came up a little shorter each passing year. Soon he’d have to find a way to provide for them too. “You’re already taking too many risks,” Gregory told himself. “Don’t screw anything up.”

“Excellent in performance of job duties and instinctively attuned to our diplomatic interests,” was how his annual evaluation characterized his efforts. “Oh, if you only knew the truth,” mused Gregory to himself as he reviewed his performance report. The ambassador, a well-connected foreign ministry veteran who had penned those words in the formal prose of the ministry’s personnel management system, added a personal note of thanks for Gregory’s hard work since arriving in his new post. “Gregory,” it read, “I’ve sent a few messages to the foreign minister about you, and he is looking forward to working with you personally when you return to the ministry next year.” The ambassador’s recommendation would be crucial for Gregory’s career, but he was a demanding boss. Underscoring his new role, Gregory’s thoughts were interrupted by the

embassy's intercom — the third summons of the afternoon. He re-buttoned his top button, tightened his tie, and grabbed his notebook on the way out, rushing down the carpeted executive hallway to see what the ambassador needed this time.

“This has just arrived with urgent precedence from home,” the ambassador huffed, waving the diplomatic telegram in frustration. Had it not been marked Top Secret, it seemed like he might have thrown it out the window onto the street below. “This new directive from the prime minister. It completely changes our longstanding posture against the United States,” he lamented. Trying hard to exude unflappable nonchalance, Gregory was dying to know what it was, and he had a suspicion he knew someone else who would be curious, too. The ambassador continued, “its contents must remain in this office, even the rest of the mission cannot know what's afoot for another week. This new directive is based on springing the trap at the right time.”

The ambassador slid the document across the long mahogany table to Gregory, who was not invited to sit down. “Draft me a speech for next week's international summit when we will announce its implementation. Don't email, it's too sensitive, just come back here when you are ready to discuss it.” Gregory turned to leave, as the ambassador added grimly, “I doubt this new regime knows what they're about to start, but we will follow orders.”

Gregory tucked the explosive telegram securely into his notebook and returned to his office, where he locked the door behind him and sat down to read. The ambassador was right. This would change relations between his home country and the United States for years to come.

The new directive was a strategic mistake in Gregory's view, but since cronies and family members had replaced most of his prime minister's professional foreign policy advisors, he reckoned there was no restraining influence in the capital. The directive reversed years of *détente*, which had started with limited bilateral

cooperation on issues of mutual concern, including logistics support. Gregory's country permitted U.S. military overflight of its territory and use of its warm water ports during winter, greatly enabling American efforts in the region. The Americans paid well in hard currency for this access, and U.S. presence did tamp down some common threats. However, if these accommodations were to be abruptly terminated, as the new directive ordered, the United States would be forced to decrease its regional security efforts, be unable to fulfill training and equipment promises to allies, and likely cede some security gains. The new directive would leave the United States scrambling just as a major new cooperative security initiative was to be unveiled.

"Mark will want to hear about this soon as possible," Gregory thought to himself. He was grateful he wouldn't have to wait long to unburden himself of the new directive. As luck would have it, Gregory had a scheduled meeting with his CIA case officer for that very night, a week before the new directive would be sprung.

Gregory had several clandestine meetings with Mark per year. They genuinely enjoyed each other's company, but personal meetings were risky and thus rare. The security and counterintelligence service back home was effective and ruthless, even in third countries far removed from their dour Cold-War era headquarters. Their brutal treatment of traitors was the stuff of legend in the foreign ministry. Diplomats and military officers who abused their privileged access to classified information didn't live long past their show trials, and more alarmingly, their families would suffer punishment as well.

Mark had been a source of encouragement for Gregory, a coach for how to stay one step ahead of the security service, a source of additional income for Gregory's family, and a friend when Gregory's daughter was hurt in a bad car accident during his previous assignment abroad. Mark had arranged for her to get the best medical care, and then the Americans picked up the tab. Gregory knew his daughter wouldn't have made the same remarkable recovery in a drab state hospital, and he remained grateful to the United States. Gregory knew America

wasn't perfect, but it was an important counterweight to the alarming mob rule at home, and he had resolved to secretly assist successive U.S. administrations in avoiding traps and feints that his country used to undermine American foreign policy.

Gregory was particularly excited for his meeting with Mark that night, his first since the promotion. Last time, Mark told Gregory that his insights from his meetings with the ambassador were appreciated by American policymakers and had proved crucial in the latest round of negotiations. Gregory's timely reporting had enabled American negotiators to sidestep a few ambushes in pursuit of the best deal possible for America and her allies. To underscore his sincerity, Mark brought a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue Label to the meeting, and the pair shared a few toasts to their partnership. Gregory knew Mark's praise was sincere. Although he couldn't tell anyone about it, he had made a difference and the whisky tasted sweeter for it. Since his recent intelligence stream inspired Mark to bring Blue Label last time, Gregory wondered where Mark would locate some pre-war Macallan to thank him for the warning about the new directive.

Tonight, Gregory had no time to dwell on sentimentality or rewards. Getting to the meeting was an elaborately choreographed affair and taking shortcuts could mean compromise and likely a long jail sentence, or worse. Gregory shuddered when he thought again of his family back home and what might happen if anything went wrong. He didn't want to focus on what the security service does to those discovered sharing secrets with CIA. Mark never downplayed the risks.

Gregory and Mark both had their ways of reaching their rendezvous safely. Mark was like clockwork. He was never late and he never missed a meeting. Mark had rehearsed with Gregory what would happen if Mark were to be late or could not make their appointed meeting, but it had never come to that.

Upon his promotion, Gregory had rewarded himself with a pair of black wingtips, which he was now beginning to regret as he walked miles in the new shoes. The

ambassador had called him back in, and Gregory didn't have time to return home to get the broken-in ones before he started his journey hours before. He wound his way through the city, stopping to feed the ducks at the pond, all the while paying close attention to who might be following him. It was winter, but he found himself sweating in nervous anticipation. Clandestine meetings never become routine, and his adrenaline was pumping as he approached the meeting site. During the last few blocks, every reflection of colored glass looked like lights on a police car and each squeal of the tramline on its tracks sounded like a siren. The streetlights flickered as Gregory rounded the last bend in the street, expecting to see Mark seated on the bench next to the railroad underpass, ostensibly reading a newspaper.

Back at the CIA Station, Mark felt anything but professional. He represented the most powerful nation in history, yet would be binge-watching Netflix tonight. He wondered how he was going to explain his inexcusable absence to Gregory, who, Mark hoped, may have seen it coming. Should he break down the politics that had led to a government shutdown and his resulting furlough? Gregory probably wouldn't believe the truth anyway. In previous meetings, Mark had reassured Gregory that if he ever were to miss a meeting, it would only be because it was in the interest of Gregory's safety. Now he seethed with frustration.

Days before, the Chief of Station had warned Mark and his colleagues, again, that the majority of station officers would be furloughed and all scheduled clandestine meetings would be missed if the government shut down. "Unless your source is certain to have imminent threat information, you'll be catching up on your daytime TV this weekend. Sources who report on broad strategic and policy information will not be met during a shutdown," said the chief, adding, "let's hope they're current on their missed-meeting protocols."

Mark had heard this speech before. Careening from crisis to crisis, his political masters back home usually averted shutdown at the 11th hour, and Mark and his colleagues around the world would get them the intelligence whose importance

they seemed to forget when the partisan drama began. Mark had been through a near miss in 2011 and a demoralizing shutdown that lasted the first half of October 2013. Back then, he had figured he could at least make his agent meetings. Even if he wasn't going to get paid for it, it was the right thing to do. A few other station officers had similar plans. When the boss found out, he reminded them that volunteering their time for the good of national security was a felony and that they could actually go to prison if they tried to engineer convenient run-ins with their sources. "Furlough means furlough, I'm not kidding around here," was now a standard line of the Chief's furlough speech.

Mark sent a few emails to some local contacts asking to reschedule meetings, but there was no secure way to contact Gregory in advance. Before leaving the office, Mark set up his out of office email reply, wanting to write, "Sorry I can't respond to your email, but I can't do my job unless 535 people back home do theirs." But he thought about the chief's tolerance for back talk and just went with the suggested anodyne language from the lawyers.

"Where could he be?" Gregory wondered. Maybe he was in the wrong place? Gregory and Mark had several meeting locations around the city as not to set a pattern. He jogged his memory. No, he was in the right spot. Maybe he was early? Gregory double-checked his watch, greeting the precise 8 o'clock reading with displeasure. He had arrived exactly at the appointed time. But it could be that Mark was late. There were some protests on the other side of town and the street closures had the potential to snarl traffic. Mark would be along shortly.

Fifteen agonizing minutes passed, during which Gregory found himself feeling increasingly conspicuous and uncomfortable, alternately sitting and standing there by the bench. A few trains rumbled across the overpass, breaking the silence. He untied and retied his shoes, pretended to check the nearby local bulletin board for upcoming civic events, and tried to act casual. His palms were sweating, making it hard to hold his third cigarette in as many minutes. Gregory had mostly kicked the habit, but the stress of clandestine meetings was only

assuaged with nicotine. By 8:30 he realized Mark wasn't coming. He felt let down, but maybe something horrible had happened. Maybe Mark had detected that he was under surveillance and steered the authorities away from Gregory. Maybe he was arrested by the local security service. Gregory's mind raced with a thousand things that could have happened to Mark and wondered if this was a portent of things to come. Was he in danger? Was his family okay? Gregory tried to discipline his racing thoughts as he headed back home, feeling that the stress of his double life was somehow more acute that night.

Gregory winced with each agonizing step up the stairs to his apartment, calculating that he had more blisters than toes. He never noticed how many stairs there were before, and he resolved to seek ground floor accommodations in the future. He lay in bed, but sleep would not come. Gregory tried to convince himself that tonight's no-show was just a test. Maybe Mark decided to intentionally be absent to see how faithfully Gregory would follow their rehearsed communications plan. As the sun rose, Gregory was thankful that his night of worry was over, and went over Mark's emergency instructions one more time in his head. He dressed and headed to the embassy, this time remembering to wear his broken-in shoes for tonight's second attempt to link up with Mark. During the day he attended to his ambassador and reviewed his first draft of the summit speech, slipping away just long enough to make a copy of the new directive for Mark. Copying a Top Secret document was strictly forbidden, and given the traffic around the office copier, Gregory hadn't had a chance to do it the day before. Today, he took advantage of a quiet spell during lunch.

Again, Gregory left his office, the photocopy tightly folded up inside a pack of cigarettes, and made his way over several hours to the designated backup spot. And again, no sign of Mark. Gregory waited a while as panic set in. Surely this confirmed that last night was no test — something was wrong. Gregory was frustrated that there was nothing he could do but wait a few weeks and try again. "There had better be a good reason for this," he thought, thinking about all the risks he had already taken for his case officer over the past year. "What if the

ambassador tries to call tonight with an urgent requirement? I can cover one night pleading my phone was out of battery, but two in a row?”

Events would unfold rapidly in the coming days, as dignitaries assembled at a convention center downtown, not far from Gregory’s embassy. During a keynote speech to world leaders, a visiting American official unveiled the new U.S. regional military engagement plan, the product of months of fraught interagency wrangling, and ostensibly based on the best intelligence available. He made a plea for increased cooperation against common threats in the region, which presupposed a high level of logistical support to move assets into theater. The official spelled out the planned increase in “ironclad” U.S. engagement.

Gregory attended the assembly as well, wearing both his new wingtips and his poker face, taking notes for his ambassador, who then rose and ascended the dais. “I have some new instructions from my government,” he began. Gregory squirmed in his seat, feeling a mix of regret and exasperation, and tried not to make eye contact with Mark, who was there too, seated behind the American delegation across the auditorium. As the ambassador read his speech, the American official blanched. The new directive was still tucked safely in its hiding place.

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