

WALTER PINCUS' GREAT INTELLIGENCE WORK

Walter Pincus had a [piece](#) yesterday purporting to lay out the inaccuracies in the chapter of James Risen's *State of War*. In it, he includes this passage.

In Vienna in late February 2000 to deliver the materials to an Iranian mission to the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Russian, according to Risen's book, "unsealed the envelope with the nuclear blueprints and included a personal letter of his own to the Iranians. No matter what the CIA told him, he was going to hedge his bets. There was obviously something wrong with these blueprints – so he decided to mention that fact to the Iranians in his letter."

Risen's book reprints the letter, saying the Russian later gave the CIA a copy.

The CIA trial witnesses and agency memos tell a different story.

The agency plan always was that the schematics and drawings would have some obvious flaws – and the Russian engineer was told about them. It also was part of the plan from the start that the design materials were to be accompanied by a letter from the Russian noting some errors. A Jan. 10, 2000, CIA memo carries a draft of what it describes as "the letter to be included in the package of material."

It has elements almost word for word found in the letter as printed in the Risen book, but it was written cooperatively with CIA input and made part of the document package for the Iranians more than a month before the Russian arrived in Vienna.

Now, I think the trial did show that there were some inaccuracies in the book – the one the Merlins cared most about is that they weren't defectors.

But I find it really curious that Pincus claims these were errors. I say it's curious because unless I'm mistaken, the transcripts for all the CIA witnesses save Bill Harlow have not been loaded onto the docket and so probably aren't yet done. And in the 5 of 6 days of testimony I attended (including all but a few minutes of Bob S' testimony, whom Pincus cites by name), I didn't see Pincus in the courtroom once. And with the exception of Merlin himself, the CIA witnesses I missed, for the most part, talked about issues other than the Merlin operation. So it's unclear where Pincus got his understanding of CIA witness testimony, and what he got is inaccurate.

Indeed, in this limited example, Pincus makes two pretty significant errors: in suggesting Merlin was supposed to know about the flaws in (as opposed to the incompleteness of) the blueprints, and in suggesting the CIA is certain about what Merlin left at the IAEA in March 2000.

First, the flaws. Throughout discussions about this operation, there has been some confusion between the flaws and the incompleteness, which has allowed the CIA to push back on the story when in fact the CIA records show this may be a convenient way to claim Risen's book was wrong when what the CIA thought is meaningless if the Russians still had concerns. While Merlin was told the blueprints were incomplete, he was not told about the flaws the nuclear lab (probably Sandia) put in the blueprints that were supposed to prevent the Iranians from using them (but only held back a national lab team 3 months in using the same blueprints). According to my notes, for example, Bob S said they "didn't want to say [the blueprints] were intentionally flawed," to Merlin. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that Merlin and (far more

importantly) the other Russian asset involved in this operation saw what they believed were problems that would make the blueprints not serve the purpose the Russians believed they were supposed to serve, and there is reason to believe that those concerns were never adequately addressed.

In addition, as I noted in this [Salon piece yesterday](#), CIA doesn't actually have the final version of what Merlin left with the IAEA. They claim – with questionable credibility, which I'll return to – not to know what was in the formal letter Merlin left. Bob S himself agreed in his testimony that Pincus supposedly reviewed that Merlin is the only person who knows what he put in the final version. At the very least the story the CIA tells is that Merlin took a copy of the letter drafted in conjunction with the CIA to Vienna but with the nuke references altered to make sure he could get through customs (Bob S called it “sanitized”), then changed them back on the hotel computer and printed a fresh copy (note, earlier in this process, Merlin at times sent stuff off to the Iranians before the CIA had a chance to review it, so he had a history of freelancing). He then destroyed the disk he used, meaning no one – according to what Merlin told CIA – has a copy (though the almost-final version without any last minute changes would reside on Merlin's poorly secured home computer). Interestingly, Risen's book says Merlin wrote a report back, but Bob S and Merlin (apparently) claim he did not.

But that printed letter is not all Merlin left with the blueprints. He also left a handwritten letter in his packet of newspaper-wrapped nuclear blueprints – what Bob S called a “cover note.” The current story – relying on an earlier idea floated during the drafting period but not formally adopted – is that the cover note would help alert the Iranian staffers to the ultimate intended recipient of the letter. But that letter was by all appearances ad-libbed by Merlin. So we only have Merlin's word for what

he wrote.

Now these are just two details – details in Risen’s book that Pincus claims were disproven by cables and Bob S’ testimony – but which were anything but.

I will have a much longer summary of all the other details that came out at trial that made it clear the operation was an even bigger shitshow than Risen’s report makes out. But for the moment, I’m just curious what Pincus is trying to accomplish. Perhaps he was in the back of the courtroom for a tiny part of Bob S’ testimony and neither I nor the several other journalists I asked noticed him. But (at least as far as testimony) it appears he’s working off second-hand claims about what the record says and claiming, falsely, that they specifically disprove Risen’s book.

Why?

Why would whoever provided Pincus this partial view of Bob S’ testimony be so desperate to claim that Risen’s book was proven wrong?