

MERLIN WAS READING JAMES RISEN IN 1999

On March 16, 1999, Jeffrey Sterling met with Merlin, the Russian scientist Sterling was trying to get to establish ties with Iran so he could hand off a nuclear blueprint. (Exhibit 22) Merlin seemed to be getting impatient – and perhaps a little insulted – that the Iranians he was approaching weren't showing more interest in his 20 year experience as a Russian nuclear engineer. So he made an utterly bizarre suggestion.

[M] then suggested that in some of his future messages, he may make mention of the recent revelation that another country had secured nuclear secrets from the U.S. [M]'s reasoning was that others now see that it is possible to obtain nuclear secrets which can advance their programs, and that the project can build upon that supposition to entice the Iranians. [Sterling] lauded [M] for his thinking but said some thought would need to be given to such a proposition prior to [M] implementing it.

Merlin has to be referring to the stories about Wen Ho Lee which started appearing on page one of the NYT starting on March 6, 1999. (Remember, too, that Merlin lived in the NY area, so if he read this in the dead tree version – as most people still read newspapers in 1999 – he most likely read it in the NYT.)

Those stories were written by James Risen.

Which is strong evidence that Merlin was reading Risen as far back as 1999.

Merlin's suggestion – that he, a CIA asset, entice Iran to accept his Russian blueprint by pointing out that China had allegedly jump-started its own nuclear weapon program by stealing blueprints from the US – reveals just

how unclear on the concept of the operation Merlin was. After all, it had to have been suspicious enough to Iran that a Russian who had moved to the US was seeking to deal blueprints (it's unclear whether the blueprints were ultimately in English or Russian). Any suggestion that the Iranians would thereby be getting US, as opposed to Russian, technology should have alarmed them greatly.

It's also, of course, a bizarre commentary on the arc of Risen's career, that the main character in a future book of his would be monitoring nuclear developments by reading Risen. Risen, of course, managed to protect his sources in both cases, in a series that unfairly identified Wen Ho Lee as a Chinese spy and in a book that raised real questions about what our nuclear establishment was doing.

I'm still waiting for Merlin's transcript on this point, but his wife was asked whether she and her husband knew of or knew Risen. "I start to know about Jim Risen after he wrote the book," Mrs. Merlin testified on the stand in her imperfect English. She went further, asserting that her husband did not know (it's unclear whether she meant "of," or "personally") before, either. Given how much of the Wen Ho Lee story was driven by Risen between March 6 and March 16, 1999, Merlin probably had known "of" Risen for years before Risen started reporting on the operation that we now refer to by Merlin's codename.

And yet, I'm fairly certain, the fact that Merlin offered up Risen reporting to the man now convicted of having leaked to Risen, Jeffrey Sterling, 4 years before that leak began, never got mentioned at the trial.