

HOT AND COLD RUNNING SOURCES AND METHODS OUTRAGE

Let's stipulate that Donald Trump is an incompetent president. Let's stipulate that his fondness for the Russians exhibits at least naiveté about their intentions, if not out and out compromise. Let's agree that when he fucks up, it is fair game to scream about it as a way to limit his power. Let's acknowledge ruefully, again, that the man who got elected heckling "Lock her up!" continues to engage in far more egregious mistreatment of classified information than an email server.

But it's worth looking at one paragraph in the WaPo story on how Donald Trump shared code word intelligence with the two Russian Sergeys, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and the omnipresent Ambassador to the US Sergey Kislyak last week.

First, some background.

The whole point of the story, which is sourced to "current and former U.S. officials," just one of whom is described as a former intelligence official (meaning the others could be members of Congress), is that Trump's actions are particularly egregious because he revealed the city from which ISIS was allegedly plotting a laptop attack on US planes that has led US Homeland Security to consider ineffective bans on laptops in passenger areas of planes.

Trump went on to discuss aspects of the threat that the United States learned only through the espionage capabilities of a key partner. He did not reveal the specific intelligence-gathering method, but he described how the Islamic State was pursuing elements of a specific plot and how much harm such an attack could cause under varying circumstances. Most alarmingly, officials said, Trump

revealed the city in the Islamic State's territory where the U.S. intelligence partner detected the threat. [my emphasis]

Revealing the city, these US officials sharing the information anonymously because of "the sensitivity of the subject" explain, might help ID the US ally or capability involved in revealing this laptop threat.

The identification of the location was seen as particularly problematic, officials said, because Russia could use that detail to help identify the U.S. ally or intelligence capability involved. Officials said the capability could be useful for other purposes, possibly providing intelligence on Russia's presence in Syria. Moscow would be keenly interested in identifying that source and perhaps disrupting it.

Hmmm. How many cities does ISIS still hold...?

The other problem with sharing this information is that it is not ours to share. This ally gets very frustrated when it discovers we shared information that it hasn't permitted us to share.

At a more fundamental level, the information wasn't the United States' to provide to others. Under the rules of espionage, governments – and even individual agencies – are given significant control over whether and how the information they gather is disseminated, even after it has been shared. Violating that practice undercuts trust considered essential to sharing secrets.

[snip]

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provide to others. Under the rules of espionage, governments – and even individual agencies – are given significant control over whether and how the information they gather is disseminated, even after it has been shared. Violating that practice undercuts trust considered essential to sharing secrets.

The officials declined to identify the ally but said it has previously voiced frustration with Washington's inability to safeguard sensitive information related to Iraq and Syria.

"If that partner learned we'd given this to Russia without their knowledge or asking first, that is a blow to that relationship," the U.S. official said.

So: bad to share because this ally gets to veto any sharing of this information, and "if that partner learned we'd given this to Russia without their knowledge or asking first, that is a blow to that relationship." And especially bad to share the city (even though there can't be many possibilities) because that would make it easier to figure out the underlying sources and methods.

This stuff is so sensitive, the WaPo explains, that if anyone else were to share it (with an adversary, they caveat), it'd be illegal.

For almost anyone in government, discussing such matters with an adversary would be illegal.

You with me so far? Sharing bad without okay of frustrated ally, sharing location especially bad, illegal if you're not the President.

Okay. Now read this paragraph:

The Post is withholding most plot details, including the name of the city, at the urging of officials who warned

that revealing them would jeopardize important intelligence capabilities.

So multiple people learned of this event, and went out and leaked it (which is illegal to do for most anyone besides the President, the WaPo helpfully notes), not just with the WaPo's two reporters, but with reporters from BuzzFeed, NYT, WSJ, and more. They leaked it to reporters who they presumably knew would then report it, alerting the frustrated ally that Trump had shared the information, which is a blow to that relationship, and also alerting the frustrated ally that they then proceeded to go leak it more.

I'm confused, is that a blow to that relationship too, leaking the sharing so it can be revealed? Or did, say, the Saudis call up a bunch of members of Congress and former spooks and permit them to leak this to the press so Donald and his close relationship with the Russians can be undermined?

And these sources who are outraged that Trump shared the city where our frustrated ally that shouldn't learn we're leaking it without its permission learned of the plot? These sources shared plot details, including the name of the city, with journalists whose job it is to publish stuff like this, though the journalists didn't share it with us or the Russians.

Now, I'll grant you, WaPo's reporters aren't an adversary (depending on who you ask), though neither are they tasked with keeping a nation that has already lost a plane to ISIS safe. WaPo's reporters aren't fighting for power in Syria like Russia (and our frustrated ally), so they can't personally use this information for advantage there.

So, yeah, it's different. But these very outraged sources are still sharing the information that it is so outrageous to share.

Me? I'm hoping all this sharing and leaking about sharing will reveal what the underlying

threat really is supposed to be. Because some of our frustrated allies have a habit of exaggerating threats so we implement stupid transportation policies and grow ever more reliant on their intelligence that they seem to keep sharing even though it seems to keep getting leaked.