THE PETRAEUS ESPIONAGE FILE

I may have awakened him. The late James Jesus Angleton, once the chief of CIA counterintelligence, sounded kinda groggy to me after I got him-loud and clear!-on my famously untrustworthy ouija board. Of course I have no idea whether he gets to sleep at all. I don't quite know exactly "where" he is, after all, and he doesn't answer direct questions on the subject. Anyway, there he was, and I started right in.

ML: So what am I supposed to think about Petraeus?

JJA: That you're living in a country where espionage is rampant.

ML: Huh?

JJA: Have you read those stories about the "software breakdowns" in the Romney get-out-the-vote program "Orca"?

ML: Sure, it didn't work, passwords didn't work, it was a gigantic snafu.

JJA: Uh huh. And has anyone raised the possibility that the Romney organization was penetrated in order to introduce "fatal errors" in their computers?

ML: Actually I don't believe I've seen that in print, although I'm sure somebody must have thought of it.

JJA: I mean, the Obama people know all about Stuxnet, right?

ML: Yes, the killer worm that was fed into the computers that run the centrifuges in the Iranian nuclear program.

JJA: So if politics is war by other means, why shouldn't they use similar methods in the election?

ML: Haven't you inverted that? Didn't Clausewitz say that "war is the continuation of politics by different means"? You're the literary expert, but still...

JJA: I expected you'd like the inversion. Anyway, "Orca" is a good case for espionage, don't you think?

ML: Ok, I'll buy that. But what does it have to do with the Petraeus story?

JJA: Everything. Both are potential espionage stories. On Petraeus, for starters, we're told that the FBI was investigating some "broader" thing, and they just happened to come across emails

between him and her. As if the bureau weren't running an investigation into Petraeus all along.

ML: Why would they do that?

JJA: Jeez, nobody knows anything any more! (coughing again, he'd probably lit up a Camel). It's routine. The FBI always monitors the top levels of CIA, especially the director, any time there is reason for them to worry about a national security counterintelligence matter. Everybody in the business knows that.

And all they need to open one of those investigations is a complaint, or a tip, from anybody. You can't imagine how many hours are devoted to checking out anonymous leads. I can give you lots of recent stories about promotions and nominations being held up because some fabulist sent a little whisper across the transom of an inspector general's office...

ML: And the CIA guys know that? Petraeus knew that?

JJA: Of course. And he also knew what any moderate geek knows, namely that gmail is an open book. Any skilled nerd can read most anybody's emails. We don't ever use email here.

ML: You've got computers?

JJA: Indeed. What do you think that "cloud" thing is all about anyway? We control it.

ML: I should have known! So Petraeus knew that people were reading, or at least could read, all his passionate emails to his lover.

JJA: Yes. And he knew enough about such matters to realize that when the counterintel people became aware of the affair, the bureau would instantly worry that he could be blackmailed. So they would go back through all his emails, and all hers as well, to everyone.

ML: Just because they were having an affair?

JJA: Unlikely. Most of the time, there's either evidence, or allegations, that classified information has been compromised. The Intelligence Community, and the national security crowd more broadly, isn't a model of virtue. CIA has had many cases of top officials sleeping around, sometimes with underlings, sometimes with outsiders. Sometimes the Agency has taken punitive action, sometimes not...

ML: Yeah, I know. And by the way, you know that letter to the *New York Times'* "ethicist" from a cuckolded husband that everyone suspected to be about the Petraeus affair? The *Times* says it wasn't. So...

JJA: So, if the letter is kosher, there's another high-level official carrying on an affair. No surprise.

ML: I think that blackmail is not what it used to be. When I had to pass security exams, I was told, for example, that gays could be blackmailed because they were terrified of being outed. But that was in the eighties. I doubt a threat of exposure would be very effective nowadays.

JJA: That's what I hear, too. So why did the bureau fear Petraeus might be blackmailable?

ML: Right. If someone threatened to expose him, couldn't he just say "be sure to print the really great pictures"?

JJA: I'd have to know more about his psychology. But I found his "message to the CIA" confession quite amazing. It reminds me of confessions from the Soviet purge trials. It's one of the most humiliating statements ever. Which baffles me. Why didn't he just resign?

ML: Indeed. And there's that odd statement from him, "the president permitted me to resign..."

JJA: As if he couldn't just turn in his badges and go home.

ML: Maybe that's where the blackmail comes in.

JJA: Good one! The White House knew about the investigation (the FBI would have briefed Holder, and he would have told the president) for quite a while, but kept him at Langley until the election was over.

ML: Makes sense.

JJA: Sure, but it also suggests that they had some way to keep him on the job, doesn't it? And that "some way" isn't loyalty or friendship, because when he went, he went in the most devastatingly damaging way possible.

ML: And you're saying that's not his decision, it was imposed on him?

JJA: What do I know? But it sure stinks of that. He wasn't very masochistic, was he?

ML: Not at all. He was famous, already in the early days in Iraq, for going around with a phalanx of Public Affairs officers squiring him from meeting to meeting. He's very attentive to his image, and some of his colleagues resented that no end.

JJA: There you go. So he's not the sort who would be overcome with guilt and driven to make a piteous public confession of sins.

ML: I never met him, but the humiliating confession seemed out of character to me.

JJA: Don't you love counterintelligence? You start with the theory that he was blackmailed out of office, and you quickly move to a theory that he was blackmailed into remaining in office. That's why "wilderness of mirrors" is such a good description...

ML: So, if the sex scandal doesn't work, what could they have used to keep him chained to his desk? Some other scandal? Corruption in Iraq? In Afghanistan?

But he was gone. Maybe back to sleep. Wouldn't blame him.

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