

# History of espionage

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## Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

### Podcast Transcript

**(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)**

As with so many topics we've covered, the history of espionage begins way back in postiquity. The impulses behind keeping secrets and stealing secrets and butting into other peoples business are ingrained in human DNA. as long as there has been

conflict among groups of people, as long as there has been drama and gossip, there have been attempts to steal that drama and spread that gossip. humans are by nature sneaky sneakers. That's the technical term. The ancient Egyptians employed sophisticated spy networks, as did their Hebrew slaves. Ditto the greeks and romans. Perhaps the oldest and most famous codified explanation of espionage and spying techniques comes from the Art of War by Sun Tzu, a text that dates from feudal China and is still referenced today by confused douchebros everywhere. If someone is quoting the art of war, 100% that person is taking a situation horribly out of context and applying weirdly aggressive tactics to everyday scenarios. "yeah bro, I follow the immortal advice of Sun Tzu; who said, "let your plans be dark and

impenetrable as the night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt. That's why I never lose at beer pong."

Sun Tzu did lay the foundation for modern military intelligence and he even identified different categories of spies, differentiating between those who steal secrets and those who spread misinformation. But perhaps the first actual spying operation, in the sense of being an organization dedicated to stealing secrets and decrypting covert communications, was created by a badass spymaster named Francis. Francis Walsingham was a British barrister working for Queen Elizabeth the first, and he famously untangled a plot against the queen hatched by Mary Queen of Scots. This is a complicated scenario and I went way too deep down the rabbit hole on this one but it's actually

super fascinating, so we're going to cover it.

Walsingham (i'm going to refer to him as Walsingham because Mary Queen of Scots was briefly married to the king of France, whose name was *also* Francis, and two francises in France will just end up being a mindfuck. Technically only one was in France but you get the idea. So here's the TLDR: mary Queen of Scots was born as the queen of Scotland, go figure, and was a descendant of the Tudor lineage, which also gave her a legitimate claim to the English throne. In an attempt to unite Scotland and France, Mary was wed to the Dauphine of France, Francis the second, and briefly became queen before Francis died, at which point she was sent back to Scotland, where much shenaniganning ensued. Suffice to say she ended up in England, where her cousin

Elizabeth the first was now queen, and saw Mary as a legitimate threat. Elizabeth essentially locked Mary down in home confinement. And Elizabeth's concerns were eventually proven correct....sort of. Like, if you lock someone down and treat them like a criminal and then they act like a criminal... that's kind of on you.

Although "treat like a criminal" is subjective.

Under house arrest she had a staff of 16 and a private chef. Feel free to confine me any time, English royalty. I'll be the gimp. So Whether it was justified or not, Mary began corresponding with some shady individuals using encoded messages.

The shadiest of these individuals was a banker named Alberto Ridolfi, which sounds like the name of a guy who will definitely steal your girlfriend. Ridolfi wanted to depose the Protestant Elizabeth and

return a catholic ruler to the throne. Enter Walsingham. He set up a complex espionage and information network of so-called intelligencers, arrested one of the conspirators who was a messaging intermediary, forced him to reveal the code, intercepted all of Mary's correspondence and eventually did find the smoking gun message, in which Mary agreed to a plot to overthrow and murder Elizabeth. Walsingham promptly responded by murdering Mary, much to the surprise and chagrin of the queen. It's not a happy ending. But this was one of the most famous modern spying operations, and Walsingham's techniques and spying network would eventually grow in breadth and scope and influence, providing the template for later espionage organizations like Mi6 and the CIA.

In the late 1600s the center of the espionage world shifted across the channel to France, where the sun king—Louis the 14th, the XIV, his buddies called him ex-ziv, little known fact—pumped resources into the “cabinet noir”—the black room or black chamber—which was a sophisticated spying operation headquartered in the French post office and dedicated to intercepting and scrutinizing correspondence without tipping off the recipient that his or her letters had been compromised. Not to be outdone, England created their own version of the black chamber and focused on deciphering the code systems of foreign states. Meanwhile, as the industrial revolution dawned, corporate espionage became commonplace. Especially in the arena of military technology. The

Spanish spy network of the 1700s became infamous for stealing state secrets regarding ship-making and cannon-building from England, and a notorious espionage caper targeting France earned Spain the coveted recipe for "Pierre's famous sourdough breadsticks" later reclaimed by France only to be stolen once again by one of America's most insidious organizations, the Olive Garden Italian restaurant chain.

Speaking of America, the upstart rebels successfully used spy networks against the British...George Washington, in fact, would become known as "America's first spy master," and in particular his spy network called the "Culper ring" was instrumental in turning the tide of the war, and so secretive that their existence wasn't revealed for years and at least one of their

identities—agent 355—is still unknown. And this points to one of the obstacles to exploring the topic of spies and spying. By definition and due to the nature of the industry, the most successful spies are never identified. If you're a well-known spy, you probably suck at your job. Case in point: Famous revolutionary spy Nathan Hale cemented his place in the history books when he said, "I regret that I have but one life to give for my country." Of course, if Hale had been as good at spying as he was at crafting memorable quips, he might not have been caught and executed on his very first mission, in which case the one life he gave for his country might have lasted longer than 21 years. More successful as an American revolutionary spy was James Armistead, a slave who pretended to be an American runaway

seeking shelter with the British. He offered American military secrets as collateral for his freedom, but instead provided the redcoats with false intelligence while simultaneously feeding accurate info back to the Americans. For his contribution to the war effort, in the wake of the British defeat which he helped architect, Armistead was promptly re-enslaved, ouch, until 1787, when French military general and hero of the revolution Lafayette was able to finally secure his release. This was the Lafayette, who as you probably already know, went to France for more funds and came back with more guns. Lafayette! For the Hamilton fans.

So Armistead's technique of pretending to be a turncoat and then turn-coating against the redcoats is a great example of saying the word coat too many times in

one sentence, but also of the complexity and moral grey areas inherent in the spy game. When your job is to lie and steal and pretend to be someone you're not, you're dabbling in ethical grey areas that can permanently skew your moral compass.

You may have heard of Benedict Arnold, a spy whose name became synonymous with betrayal. A decorated American general who claimed he was repeatedly passed over for promotions, Arnold conspired with the British to surrender the New York fort that would later become West Point, but his plan was uncovered by George Washington's Culper ring and Arnold barely escaped with his life. He joined the British army as a brigadier general, leading British forces against American armies, burning the fields of his homeland and

slaughtering many of his former compatriots. He wound up in merry old England after the war before finally succumbing to gout at age 60, but still lives to this very day in infamy. Fuck that guy. I'm not a huge patriot but I'm also not a supporter of betrayal and disloyalty. I hope the gout was unpleasant. Don't be a Benedict Arnold.

There are other famous examples of double agents, and we'll talk about some of the most notable shortly. But for now let's continue our trip down espionage memory lane.

The next major development in the world of spying and military intelligence was the great game, a 19th century cold war waged primarily between Russia and Britain as the major powers of the developed world vied for colonial supremacy across the globe.

As the world became more interconnected, nations established diplomatic outposts in rival countries, and embassies became the perfect headquarters for spy networks. It's like giving your nosy neighbor an entire room in your house and then being shocked when pictures of your sex swing wind up on the Internet.

The first official, permanent military intelligence service—the Evidenzbureau—one word like evidence bureau but with a z, was founded by the Austrian Empire in 1850, followed closely in 1854 by the British Topographical & Statistic Department.

Naming-wise, advantage Austria. One word vs four, plus Austria used an unnecessary z, which I don't enjoy when tech companies do it but it's way cooler when we're talking about spies. Spies with a z. Spyz. That's definitely an app. And now I'm back to hating it. In

1885 the US established its first official espionage agency, the military information division, and by the early 1900s every superpower had their own version of a spying agency. With the proliferation of intelligence agencies naturally comes the dawn of counterintelligence; bureaus and organizations dedicated to detecting and exposing foreign spies. Remember Mad Magazine, Spy vs Spy? The black and white spies dressed kind of like witches for some reason with the wide brimmed hats? That's what I picture when anyone talks about counterintelligence. With the cone faces? Were they birds? How did I do a full episode on spies and I didn't explore the intrigue of the mad magazine cone-faced spy-witches.

The rise of government espionage in the early 1900s also coincided with the rise

of the spy novel, and the popularity of spy stories in turn fueled interest and activity in the actual espionage industry.

In England, the secret service bureau, established in 1909, would eventually fracture into numerous departments including the Directorate of military intelligence section 5, AKA MI5, focused on counterintelligence, and the Military Intelligence Section 6, or MI6, which would become the model for America's CIA.

Speaking of which, America's Central Intelligence Agency was created in the wake of World War 2, based on an earlier version known as the Office of Strategic Services, which had been founded under Franklin Delano Roosevelt. And while the CIA is America's most well-known intelligence agency, the United States already had an

established *counter* intelligence agency that would become arguably more critical and possibly more controversial. The NSA, the National security agency, is America's go-to for SIGINT, or signals intelligence, dedicated to collecting, deciphering, and decrypting information. The NSA was born from the Cipher bureau, established in the wake of World War One. Also known as the black chamber, the cipher bureau was America's first peacetime intelligence gathering organization. And their actions in the mid-1900s would foreshadow the sketchy bullshit they're involved with today. The NSA convinced a bunch of Telegraph companies like western union to turn over the private communications of citizens and non citizens alike. And just as a rule of thumb: if you're a private company

like Western Union and you're approached by an organization that calls itself "the black chamber," you might want to ask a few more questions before you give them a bunch of customer info. Does it really sound like you're working with the good guys? "Yeah, hi, western union? we're a division of the United States government known as satan's minions, and we're going to need you to break a few laws for us. This will absolutely not blow up in your face." But today the NSA often manages to fly under the radar—many Americans have never even heard of the NSA—which makes sense, secrecy is kind of their whole job, but it's also because they're not quite as sexy as the other agencies. Note to self, if you want to get away with highly unethical privacy-invading shenanigans, be unsexy. That's a tough ask for me.

But while the CIA is home of the actual spies, the NSA is home of the nerds that assist the spies. They're the guys on the laptop with the headphones yelling, "give me ten more seconds, I'm breaching the cyber defenses now. Alright the shields are down!" They're the guys in the heist movie who are *not* Brad Pitt or George Clooney. They wear hipster glasses and emo haircuts. They're also the guys who read all of your email. The NSA is notoriously involved in mass data collection, including the surveillance programs exposed by Edward Snowden in which the NSA was revealed to be creating an actual goddam copy of the entire Internet and spying on all of America's domestic Internet traffic. I think I speak for most Americans when I say with full sincerity Fuck the NSA. Also, thanks for helping take

down the nazis and all of the good stuff you did but also suck it, geeks.

So Along with the Russian KGB, all of the aforementioned modern spying agencies would become the primary combatants in a new version of simmering conflict between nations. As the Cold War dawned, the open hostility of battle transformed into the covert hostility of espionage. This was primarily due to the rise of nuclear power and nuclear weapons. When America dropped atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Heroshima, the world collectively gasped and clutched their international pearls, immediately understanding that the global balance of power had shifted, and that the consequences of warfare had suddenly escalated. For the first time in history,

mankind had created a weapon capable of exterminating humanity. Instead of just repeatedly stomping on humanities testicles. That's what world wars were in the past. We didn't have the power to destroy the world, but we could make it super miserable and uncomfortable for long stretches of time. As a result of the very real possibility of nuclear annihilation, conflict between nuclear-armed nations went underground, as the superpowers that had emerged victorious from WW2 began vying for global supremacy while also trying to avoid global destruction. Like you want to poke the bull but you don't want the horns. Competition, conflict, and ultimately warfare didn't end, but they became much more passive aggressive. The Cold War was waged via espionage and proxy battles and by shifting resources to

resistance fighters in other nations. You could write a book on all of the shady post Cold War misdeeds and double crosses and all of the spying between nations... and many people have, so feel free to check those out because we don't have time for all of it now, but I guarantee this will come up in future episodes. And now much of the world's espionage has gone online... we'll also do at least an episode or two at some point on hacking and cracking and all of the cyber attacks that have been directed at our global rivals, like STUXNET etc.

So what is life like as a spy? How does it compare to the novels and movies?

According to one ex spy: "Real-life espionage is a lot less sexy — and a lot messier."

He continues ,

"a spy's life is one of tedious endurance. It's long hours of cubicle living, going through the same files everyone else in the office has gone through, hoping to catch a missed lead. Or it's waiting by the phone hoping that the third secretary from the Ecuadorian Embassy will call you back. Or keeping your fingers crossed that your next three-year assignment isn't in Chad." Yeah, suck it Chad. You hear that? Spies don't want to be sent to you. I don't know if that's bad or good. Do you get into spying thinking they're going to send you to the Bahamas? You're gonna be in the fucking desert, get used to it. I've never been to Chad but it seems like a perfectly nice country and just for that I hope you end up in Siberia, you Bougie ass spy.

So do you still want to become a spy? Here's some more advice from a former

spy named JC Carleson (and that is definitely not a pseudonym): "First of all, you have to live a fairly clean life to be able to make it through the background checks, polygraphs, medical tests, and all that." So if you're young and having fun, you better stop that shit right now, at least if you're hoping to some day realize the dream of becoming a professional liar. Is that clear, hoodlums? This country only wants the most upstanding, squeaky clean citizens to work as professional liars and international thieves. If you've stolen stuff in the past, that completely disqualifies you from the opportunity of getting paid to steal stuff in the future for your country. Although to be fair, if you have a criminal record, that means you got caught, which I guess should probably disqualify you. We should really be looking for the sleaziest

individuals with the squeakiest records. But how would you find those people? Conundrum. Here's the strategy: Just live a really boring life and then go to the CIA interview like, "trust me I got away with a lot of shit. Remember Jimmy Hoffa? That was me." So This ex spy who is definitely named JC Carlson for real also recommends that you focus on international studies, political science, obviously it will help your chances if you understand our relationship to other nations and the mechanics of a global community. And be cool with travel. You're not gonna make a great spy if you're an agoraphobic homebody. Unless you're a homebody who has a computer, in which case you're more NSA material. Also don't be allergic to peanuts or shellfish or anything, this is not advice from "JC Carlson"

but just seems like common sense. You're gonna be flying a lot, everything has peanuts in it, shellfish is very popular in Russia and China, I'm just editorializing but I feel like this is valid advice. More from this particular individual who is totally named JC Carlson, "Everyone's watched all the movies, so they think it's all high-tech and guns and car chases, but that's so not the case. Really, the techniques boil down to basic human psychology and a basic understanding of what motivates people. The work involves meeting, networking, studying, and analyzing, much more than it involves any of the things you see in a bond movie. Even though you learn these high-action techniques to get out of a dangerous situation, if you're getting into car chases, it means you're doing something wrong. People are almost

disappointed to learn that."

Also, if you're not a people person, if you're more into skulking in the shadows and being an aforementioned sneaky sneakerperson, you probably have the wrong idea about spying. People skills are vital. This person who claims to be called JC Carlson and is being absolutely honest about that says, "one of the fundamental skill sets of a CIA officer is the ability to find common ground with anybody. You don't have to like the person, but you can always find a common element with him or her." Basically, you catch more flies with honey than vinegar. So be a double-crossing ruthless lying backstabber in the nicest possible way.

We can't discuss the history of spying without talking about spies in pop culture,

because in some ways Hollywood and the entertainment industry have actually influenced the world of espionage, it's a complex feedback loop. It's not just a one-way street. And we need to talk about famous spies, spying techniques, and spy capers, And we're going to get into all of that next week. Because There's a lot more I wanted to cover, I really wanted to get into some of the most famous espionage operations, I wanted to talk about Aldrich Ames and Robert Hanssen and the The rosenbergsan adorable old couple that were executed for betraying America. And of course we have to talk about James Bond. This is just a huge subject, and we could even do entire episodes just on the CIA or MI5 or the NSA, and maybe we will in the future. But hopefully this episode provided a helpful overview of the intelligence

industry, and how it became what it is today.

Spying techniques.

For number stations, see our first episode. They're creepy and fascinating.

Let's talk about spies in the media

007

Mission Impossible

<https://www.history.com/news/queen-elizabeth-spy-network-england>

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_espionage](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_espionage)

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