



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on March 5, 2013

## 10th Anniversary of U.K. Whistleblower Almost Averting Iraq War

Ten years ago a shy, introverted British translator with skills in Mandarin leaked an e-mail she had received at her desk at Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) in Cheltenham, England. The leak [came close to averting the Iraq War](#) and changing the course of history. The memo, sent from Frank Koza, chief of staff at the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA), was essentially a direct order to Katharine Gun and others in her section to monitor, track, follow, and develop information from UN diplomats from six key nations that were waffling in their support of a UN resolution permitting action against Iraq because of its perceived threat against the peace and security of the world.



This violated not only the independence of the GCHQ from the NSA and the sovereignty inherent in that independence, but also [various laws](#) against interfering with diplomats representing their countries' interests at the UN. Further, the information sought would also likely have been personal in nature, with the resulting possibility of the threat of blackmail against those diplomats who refused to "get in line" and support the UN resolution for war against Iraq.

The Koza e-mail was, in short, a blockbuster, and it took Gun's breath away. [In an interview](#) with Amy Goodman for *Democracy Now!* in September, 2004, she recounted what happened:

I was working for Government Communication Headquarters in the U.K., which is the equivalent to N.S.A. here in the U.S., and I was a Chinese linguist at the time, and this email crossed my desk in my in-box in January of 2003.

At that time, as we all know, it was a crucial time for the U.N. in its decision-making process as to whether or not a resolution was needed with regard to Iraq and its alleged weapons of mass destruction.

So, when I saw this email asking GCHQ's help to bug the six swing nations to gather a vote for war with Iraq, I was very angry at first and very saddened that it had come to this, and that despite all of the talk from both Tony Blair and George Bush about how important it was to get the U.N. on board and to legitimize any kind of aggression, that they were actually going around it in such a low-handed manner.

I decided that the risk to my career was minute compared to the upcoming war in Iraq and the best thing to do for me was to leak this information to the press so that everybody else could have the information, and hopefully it could avert this disastrous course of events that have occurred.

Gun printed out a hard copy of the Koza memo, took it home with her that night, and gave it to the



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*Guardian* newspaper. On Sunday, March 2, 2003, just 17 days before U.S. forces attacked Iraq, the *Guardian* headlined the story: “Revealed: US dirty tricks to win vote on Iraq war.” The lead paragraph began: The United States is conducting a secret “dirty tricks” campaign against UN Security Council delegations in New York as part of its battle to win votes in favor of war against Iraq.

That same evening, the *Guardian* published the leaked e-mail [in its entirety](#):

To: [Recipients withheld]

From: FRANK KOZA, Def Chief of Staff (Regional Targets) CIV/NSA

Sent on Jan 31 2003 0:16

Subject: Reflections of Iraq Debate/Votes at UN-RT Actions + Potential for Related Contributions

Importance: HIGH

Top Secret//COMINT//X1

All,

As you’ve likely heard by now, the Agency is mounting a surge particularly directed at the UN Security Council (UNSC) members (minus US and GBR of course) for insights as to how its membership is reacting to the on-going debate RE: Iraq, plans to vote on any related resolutions, what related policies/negotiating positions they may be considering, alliances/dependencies, etc. — the whole gamut of information that could give US policymakers an edge in obtaining results favorable to US goals or to head off surprises.

In RT [Regional Targets], that means a QRC [Quick Response Capability] surge effort to revive/create efforts against UNSC members Angola, Cameroon, Chile, Bulgaria and Guinea, as well as extra focus on Pakistan UN matters.

We’ve also asked ALL RT topi’s [translator operatives] to emphasize and make sure they pay attention to existing non-UNSC member UN-related and domestic comms [communications] for anything useful related to the UNSC deliberations/debates/votes.

We have a lot of special UN-related diplomatic coverage (various UN delegations) from countries not sitting on the UNSC right now that could contribute related perspectives/insights/whatever. We recognize that we can’t afford to ignore this possible source.

We’d appreciate your support in getting the word to your analysts who might have similar, more indirect access to valuable information from accesses in your product lines [intelligence sources].

I suspect that you’ll be hearing more along these lines in formal channels — especially as this effort will probably peak (at least for this specific focus) in the middle of next week, following the SecState’s [Secretary of State’s] presentation to the UNSC.

Thanks for your help.

As the *Guardian* noted at the time, such information leaked right at the moment of highest intensity over the UN resolution [proved highly embarrassing](#) for both the British and American governments:

The existence of the surveillance operation, understood to have been requested by President Bush’s National Security Adviser, [Condoleezza Rice](#), is deeply embarrassing to the Americans in the middle of their efforts to win over the undecided delegations.



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It also proved to be very difficult for Gun. She was arrested within days of the leak on “suspicion of breach of the Official Secrets Act” but wasn’t officially charged until November. She was terminated from her position and had to post bail repeatedly as the government dithered. She explained to Gordon:

[During the] in-between months, I was bailed and re-bailed, and my life was on standstill. I was in limbo. It was a difficult time for me and my family, because we just did not know what the future held for us.

As it turned out in November they decided to charge me, and we were all pretty astounded by that decision, because we knew that so many people supported my action.

When her defense team demanded information about the charges from U.K. Attorney General [Lord Goldsmith](#), he refused, and the case against Gun collapsed. Said Gun: “They refused to hand this over, so they either had something to hide or they felt they were [in] a losing battle.”

Since then Gun’s life has been a shambles. Unable or unwilling to attempt to get full-time work, she has [chosen the life of an itinerant](#). But she has no regrets. In speaking with *Guardian* reporter Martin Bright on Saturday, she mused:

The more I think about what happened, the more angry and frustrated I get about the fact that nobody acted on [my] intelligence.... It makes you think we were so close and yet so far.

There is now a possibility that her life experience may be turned into a movie. There’s already a working title for it: *The Spy Who Tried to Stop a War*.

As things turned out, a second UN resolution to authorize the war against Iraq never materialized and air strikes began on March 19. By the time [President Obama declared the war against Iraq to be officially](#) over on August 31, 2010, more than 24,000 members of the so-called “coalition forces” were dead, another 117,000 wounded, and 151,000 civilians lay dead, many by unspeakably violent means.

As Gun noted following the collapse of the British government’s case against her,

Any disclosures that may have been made were justified on the following grounds: because they exposed serious illegality and wrongdoing on the part of the US government who attempted to subvert our own security services; and to prevent wide-scale death and casualties among ordinary Iraqi people and UK forces in the course of an illegal war.

She added: “I have only ever followed my conscience.”

There are special people who are put into particular places at critical times who have unique opportunities to change the course of history. Katharine Gun is such a one.

Photo: AP Images

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