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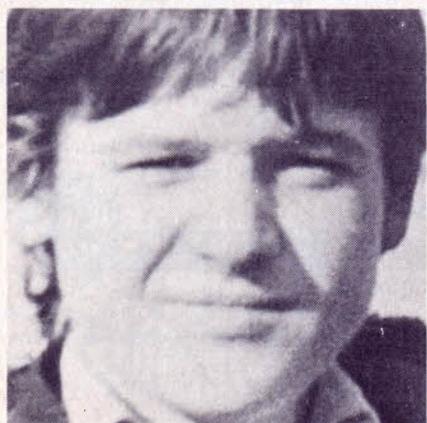
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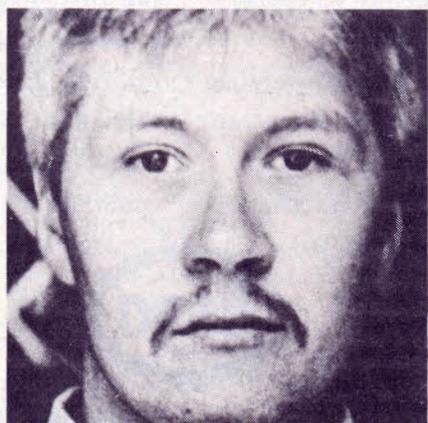
David Bell
The end of
cohabitation

DUNCAN CAMPBELL ON GIBRALTAR

**Why not
gun down
enemies
of the
state?**



Sean Savage



Danny McCann



Mairead Farrell

'That day freedom dies...'

Where even the KGB now fears to tread and the CIA operates under legal restraint, Britain has apparently moved in — to join the thin ranks of pariah states prepared to send hit teams beyond national boundaries to eliminate state enemies.

DUNCAN CAMPBELL reports

IN THE HUBBUB which now surrounds the Gibraltar killings, the government has assiduously managed to shift the debate onto the media's role in reporting what happened. Far too little is being said about the central and most serious question: should Britain be one of the few states which sends hit teams abroad to eliminate perceived enemies of the state — and in a way which its government does not, in reality, seek to deny before world opinion?

Government ministers have for weeks been saying privately, "What's all the fuss about? These people were terrorists." But the government is not prepared to be so forthright in public, and unnamed sources have been busy muddying the waters around the deaths of the three IRA members in Gibraltar. But the very decision to send in an SAS team, rather than armed police, to deal with the IRA bombers is direct evidence of an operation coordinated and directed at the highest levels of government; and of the expected outcome.

The decision to send the SAS to Gibraltar belonged to Mrs Thatcher. Any major anti-terrorist operation involving special forces units is coordinated by Cabinet Office security and intelligence staff, working under the Prime Minister's orders. According to official sources, quoted in the *Sunday Telegraph* just a week after the killings, the decision as to rules of engagement "was taken at Downing Street in late February... The Prime Minister [was] given the top secret report of a four-month surveillance operation".

Mrs Thatcher then met members of the ministerial committee supervising the intelligence services, including Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe and Defence Secretary George Younger. The instructions given by ministers were equivocally "unequivocal": once the IRA team had entered Gibraltar, they were not to be allowed back into Spain. "They were to be arrested or, if necessary, shot."

But whatever government leaks may suggest about the SAS's alleged rules of engagement for the occasion, and the supposed intent to arrest the IRA bomb team, commonsense and past experience point to a simple and different conclusion.

Gunning down enemies of the state, Gibraltar fashion, using hit teams in plain clothes far from national territory, is far less common practice than is imagined. The two leading contenders in the cold-blooded killing stakes, the KGB and CIA, have all but abandoned such activity over the past 25 years. The main example of a developed state behaving in this way is Israel. Mossad hit teams

have been kept at work since the aftermath of the massacre of Israeli athletes at Munich in 1972. Most recently, they gunned down Abu Jihad in Tunis last month. There are also South Africa (whose campaign of murder against ANC figures is not in doubt) and Bulgaria, whose agents murdered Georgi Markov in London ten years ago. It is a short shortlist.

The operations of Mossad demonstrate the hazards to innocents of state counter-terrorism. Attempting to track down a PLO leader in Norway in 1973, an Israeli surveillance team became confused and murdered an innocent Moroccan waiter instead. When, in 1979, Mossad finally killed its intended target, Hassan Salameh, it did so by means of a massive car bomb in Beirut. That bomb killed four innocent passers-by as well as Salameh and his bodyguards.

‘Was there a strategic error? The planners could have proposed, and Mrs Thatcher sanctioned, that the operation should happen more or less as it did. The government’s error lay in an over-optimistic assessment of the extent to which the still small voices of dissent had been removed from the British media’

'Magna Carta'

Whether or not public opinion in Britain might support a state policy of counter-terrorism, Mrs Thatcher is not yet ready to own up to it. The special kind of rage that the Prime Minister has directed against Amnesty International for launching its inquiry ("utterly disgraceful"), and more recently against Thames TV over the *This Week* programme, is a characteristic personal reaction to public criticism of a policy for which she is herself responsible. Her interview two weeks ago with Japanese NHK television blazed with that rage. She made a typically bold and partially successful attempt to shift the locus of argument about the rule of law from her behaviour to that of television journalists:

The freedom of peoples depends fundamentally on the rule of law, a fair legal system. . . The Common Law has come right up from Magna Carta, which has come right up through the British courts. . . a court of law is the place where you deal with these matters. If you ever get trial by television or guilt by accusation, that day freedom dies. . .

The Downing Street line was amplified by the Prime Minister's Press Secretary, Bernard Ingham, on Saturday. Ingham attacked "institutionalised hysteria" in the press. But the only hysteria that is presently apparent is that of government

itself. Ministers are indeed in something of a panic over the new round of media investigations, and it must be presumed that something went significantly wrong with the Gibraltar operation.

Possibly there was a tactical error and the dead IRA bombers were meant to be taken out with a far greater degree of circumspection than was the case. If that is what went wrong, then one scenario suggested by official sources — that the three IRA bombers would be killed in the middle of the airstrip across which the road from Gibraltar to Spain passes — would clearly have provided the SAS men with greater scope for inventiveness about threatening "hand movements" than may withstand cross-examination given the highly inconvenient presence at the petrol station of so many independent witnesses.

Or was there a strategic error? The planners could have proposed, and Mrs Thatcher sanctioned, that the operation should happen more or less as it did. The government's error then lay in an over-optimistic assessment of the extent to which after Peter Wright, Zircon and the sanitisation at the BBC, the still small voices of dissent had been removed from the British media. But that may have been only a minor error. Until Thames TV weighed in, one of the most staggering features of the Gibraltar killings was that there was no investigative reporting of the case at all. Serious indepth inquiries were not attempted by the national press until Thames re-opened the issue two weeks ago, that is almost eight weeks after the original incident.

The Gibraltar police, in whose support the SAS officially acted, appear to have been no less dilatory in investigating what took place. Rather more energy and urgency was deployed in uncovering material with which to smear *This Week* witness Carmen Proetta. At the inquest, expected to start late in June, much of the visiting British press can, on past form, be expected to be credulous about the government's account of events. Despite Mrs Thatcher and Geoffrey Howe's strident fear of "contaminating" the evidence, details of the government case at the inquest are now emerging in a small torrent.

The most comprehensive statement of the official line for June has appeared in the *Sunday Times*, citing official sources who told its reporters what "the inquest will be told". The IRA three were all challenged and then moved their hands: Savage "seemed to reach for a pocket"; McCann "appeared to reach for his trouser pocket"; and Mairead Farrell's hand "moved towards her large black shoulder bag". To these minutiae are added the observation that the white Renault car that they had left parked at the site of the intended bombing had "an unusual car aerial. . . that could receive VHF signals". (In fact, any car aerial can receive VHF signals and most do; a trip down any British motorway will take you past frequent signs advertising the VHF frequencies of local radio stations.)

Such new distractions and elaborations on the "remote control" bomb theory usefully draw attention away from the real unanswered questions about the conduct of the Gibraltar operation:



force" and arrests if possible?

The renewed public prominence of SAS operations is a direct consequence of its expansion during the Thatcher years. The retaking of the Iranian embassy — another occasion on which orders were given (*NS*, 8 April 1988) to "take no prisoners" — was the trigger for a massive input of funds and a hike in official status for the special forces warriors. Since then, a new barracks complex has been built specifically for the 22nd SAS Regiment at Hereford, while a short distance away at Pontrilas, an extensive new training area has been constructed. The Pontrilas training area includes an old Trident airliner for rehearsing hijack manoeuvres, as well as a long-range radio relay centre so that troops can report directly to their Hereford operational HQ.

A new emphasis on action rather than observation in the security services generally has followed from increased recruiting from the ranks of the military. Commissioned officers leaving SAS are generally offered a post in SIS, the Secret Intelligence Service, or alternatively (and less usually) with MI5, the Security Service. Many former SAS officers are now occupying posts in British embassies abroad, under diplomatic cover as intelligence officers of SIS.

Action rather than observation was the clear directive in Gibraltar. Had the SAS team allowed the IRA bombers to return to Spain, there is no reason to suppose that they would have evaded arrest; the Spanish police had successfully and secretly kept the bombers under surveillance on several previous occasions. But from the British government point of view, the risk was that they would be taken alive by the Spanish, when what the Prime Minister had signalled was her desire for bodies.

'Shot down like dogs'

Since Attorney General Patrick Mayhew told the House of Commons that in considering prosecutions in the aftermath of the Stalker affair, "I have had to balance one harm to national security against another", it has been plain that new official tolerance would be extended for killing under the protection of "national security". Gibraltar followed surprisingly quickly.

Commendably, the right-wing heavyweights of the press — the *Sunday Telegraph's* Peregrine Worsthorne and *Daily Telegraph* stablemate Max Hastings — have avoided the mealy-mouthed distractions of "suspicious" hand movements, smears against witness Mrs Proetta, or inspired speculation about "unusual" car aeriels. The *Sunday Telegraph* argued this week that no one would care whether the three IRA bombers were warned to surrender by the SAS before they were "shot down like dogs". This policy might well win public support, but it is also illegal, which is inconvenient.

The answer, Worsthorne argued, was to restore ancient statutes of outlawry. Not merely Victorian Values, but Medieval Morals should be restored to our national system of crime and punishment. (He did not go on to observe that the best recent European precedent for declaring state enemies to be at the mercy of the mob can be found in the actions of ministers of the Third Reich.) Where all the intelligent right-wing editors differ entirely from Mrs Thatcher is that they understand that the rule of law is precisely that and not, as she would like, a personal fiat permitting a dispensation from murder here, a special new law of contempt against journalists there. Throw it aside, and *that* day freedom dies. □

Britain has joined the select few states who gun down their enemies abroad: including the South Africans, murderers of Ruth First (left), the Israelis and the Bulgarians, murderers of Abu Jihad (inset, above) and Georgi Markov (inset, left)

IDAF

□ Why no attempt was made to cordon off the area around the white Renault as soon as it had been left parked by the terrorists at 1pm — especially if the stores about "suspicious" aeriels are true. (It would have been more likely that a conventional timer was in use and indeed one was found in Spain.) Why, if so, were members of the public in the vicinity left lethally at risk for three hours? The authorities began to cordon off the car at four o'clock — half an hour *after* the IRA three had been shot dead.

□ Why, after this, when the car had been examined

and found to contain no radio equipment, no explosives, and no bomb, was no attempt made to correct the story, reported by the entire British press on Monday, 8 March, that the bomb disposal squad in Gibraltar had defused a 400lb bomb found in the car?

□ Why was the third terrorist, Sean Savage, finished off to assure his death by one of the SAS team who, according to witnesses, stood with a foot on his chest, and fired three or four shots into the dying man's body — if the SAS's rules of engagement did indeed only specify "minimum