

Covert Sexism

The real enemy female CIA agents face is men, writes Susan Hasler

In the fictional world, assassins wield lethal weapons to threaten glamorous lady spies. In the real world, bad things happen to good female intelligence officers, and the ‘enemy within’ is generally not a mole.

Over the years a pattern has emerged of women in the CIA having their reputations tarnished by stories of alleged personal deficiencies that surface in the press. Anonymous sources in the intelligence community, or outsiders with an agenda, turn real women into caricatures.

The most recent example is an article in the *Washington Post* about the agent on whom the character Maya is based in the new film about the hunt for Osama bin Laden, *Zero Dark Thirty*. In real life this agent was passed over for promotion. The article was peppered with tales of how difficult ‘Maya’ is to get along with and how badly she treats her colleagues. ‘Maya’ herself can’t respond, because she is under cover.

Never mind that you figured out where bin Laden was, dear, you’re a bitch.

For the record, I didn’t know ‘Maya’, but I knew plenty of good female intelligence officers who were labelled either in the press or in their performance appraisals as ‘abrasive’. And yes, they could be, but often because they had to fight to be heard. Even Mary Poppins would turn caustic after a few years banging her head against a brick wall and dealing with some of the charming ‘old boys’ in the clandestine service.

This treatment is particularly galling when it happens post mortem. In December 2009, Jennifer Matthews, who devoted her life to tracking bin Laden, was killed along with six other CIA employees at a forward operating base in Afghanistan when a Jordanian source detonated a bomb.

The reaction angered Cindy Storer, a former CIA analyst and bin Laden expert. ‘Was [Matthews] thanked by a grateful public?’ she asked. ‘No – she was



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Valerie Plame was outed by a journalist ruining her career

said to be an inappropriate choice for her position, and lacking in experience and judgment, by people who had old axes to grind about the central role of former female DI [Directorate of Intelligence] analysts in the operations against Al-Qaeda.’

Never mind that you gave your life for your country, dear, we can’t have the world thinking that women in the clandestine service are competent.

In 2003, the journalist Robert Novak ended the career of Valerie Plame as an operative when he outed her as a CIA staffer in his column.

Never mind all your training, the Bush Administration needs to make a point, dear, and your career doesn’t matter to us. But, my, aren’t you pretty? Let’s focus on that.

In the early 1990s, Janine Brookner, a superb operative and later chief of station, ran foul of the old boys’ network by trying to discipline wayward male officers, including a deputy who severely beat his wife, and an operative who compromised a safe house. That operative, Aldrich Ames, turned out to be one of the most damaging turncoats in CIA history. His pals covered up his deficiencies for years before he was caught spying for the Soviet Union

by a team headed by another woman, Jeanne Vertefeuille.

CIA officers whom Brookner had disciplined painted her as boozy and licentious woman, who wore ‘brief shorts and thin T-shirts, with no perceptible underwear’. She fought back with a lawsuit alleging ‘a pervasive atmosphere of machismo and sexual discrimination’ in the Directorate of Operations. The Agency settled with her for \$410,000.

In 1995, the CIA paid out \$1 million to 400 more women who faced gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the clandestine service.

Manipulating the press is one of those things that the old boys in the intelligence service know how to do.

Spy fiction and films also do female agents a disservice by offering an image of gun-wielding seductresses who bear little resemblance to their real-life sisters.

In an article on *The Daily Beast* website, Plame took on the popular images. ‘I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been asked by seemingly reasonable people whether I had to sleep with sources to get the intelligence, and did I carry a gun and have I killed anyone? The answer to each of those questions is no.’

Dame Stella Rimington, the first female head of MI5, has published a string of more realistic spy novels. In an assessment of her work, a male academic noted with disapproval that ‘Dame Stella’s treatment of gender issues ... focuses on matters of political correctness, ignoring the implications of sex as a tool for the spy trade’. Why ever would she ignore that? Perhaps because the tool Dame Stella wielded during her career was her brain?

Women have made great strides in the CIA, rising as high as Executive Director and Deputy Director for Intelligence, but one has only to read the papers or the spy novels to see how far they have to go.

Susan Hasler worked for the CIA for 21 years and is the author of ‘Intelligence’