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Setauket to Abbottabad: The Value of Film and Television in Teaching Human Intelligence

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Setauket to Abbottabad: The Value of Film and Television in Teaching Human Intelligence

Abstract

Espionage is often referred to as the world's second oldest profession, and human intelligence is the oldest collection discipline. When many people think of espionage the images that often come to mind are fictional characters such as Jason Bourne or James Bond. Human intelligence encompasses much more than "secret agents" using their "toys" to collect top-secret information. Teaching human intelligence within an academic setting can be difficult because of the clandestine nature of tradecraft and sources of intelligence. Ironically, it is television and film that brought us Bourne and Bond that can also aid in the teaching of the variety of issues and concepts important to the study of human intelligence. This paper will examine how television and movies inspired by actual events are used as case studies to teach human intelligence in an academic setting. Cases are examined through the lenses of a variety of issues and concepts related to human intelligence, including source acquisition and development, sleepers, interrogation, denial and deception, and the legal and ethical issues impacting collection efforts. *The Assets*, *The Americans*, *Turn*, and *Zero Dark Thirty* are some of the titles that are utilized in this teaching approach and examples of how these specific titles are used are provided.

Introduction

The collection of data and information is an essential component of any intelligence process. With its roots in the biblical story of Moses and Joshua sending spies into Canaan before entering the Promised Land, human intelligence (HUMINT) is the oldest of all the collection disciplines. In fact, spying is often referred to as the world's second oldest profession.¹ While the legacy of HUMINT is long and its importance to the intelligence process is recognized, teaching the subject can be problematic. One of the greatest challenges to those tasked with teaching HUMINT, as with many other intelligence disciplines, is the secretive nature of the subject. Sources of information and tradecraft are closely kept secrets, as their discovery would hamper their exploitation or use in the future. This challenge is heightened when dealing with students within higher education or other students without appropriate security clearances. While an instructor with a firm grasp of the subject can relate the various theories and concepts that form the foundation for the study of HUMINT, finding recent real world examples familiar to students that illustrate or support this material can be problematic.

The primary challenge faced in teaching HUMINT is the collection, analysis and dissemination of intelligence occurs clandestinely. Those intelligence activities most relevant to the issues of the day usually come to light only if there are intelligence failures. One example is the case of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the reliance on an Iraqi source known as "Curveball" who fabricated information regarding mobile factories used to produce biological weapons.² This is not to say that there is no teaching value in investigating failure; however, focusing on successes allows a more balanced approach to examining the workings of the U.S. Intelligence Community (IC). Compounding the problem, when intelligence successes do come to light it is often years or even decades later. This can be extremely problematic when trying to teach intelligence to undergraduate students who, in many cases, were in the early grades of primary school on September 11, 2001. In addition, several studies have found that many undergraduate college students lack firm knowledge in American history and government. One such study conducted by the Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut found college professors surveyed believed eighty-one percent of college seniors are at a D or F grade level when it comes to

¹ Lowenthal, Mark, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, 6th edition (Washington, D.C.: Sage, 2015), 127.

² Michael Althoff, "Human Intelligence," in Mark Lowenthal and Robert Clark (eds.), *The Five Disciplines of Intelligence Collection* (Washington, DC: Sage, 2015), 68-9.

American history.³ Similarly, an Intercollegiate Studies Institute study found that college seniors who were administered a sixty-question multiple choice survey in order to measure their knowledge in areas related to American history and government scored an average of fifty-three percent, an F on a traditional grading scale.⁴ While these deficiencies in relevant historical knowledge can be overcome, many undergraduates find history courses uninteresting and boring.⁵

HUMINT is defined as any information that can be gathered from human sources and includes such activities as clandestine acquisition of photography, documents, and other material; overt collection by people overseas; debriefing of foreign nationals and U.S. citizens who travel abroad; and official contacts with foreign governments.⁶ Unfortunately, the lack of knowledge related American history and government that studies found is common among undergraduates suggests many students may think of human intelligence as nothing more than covert action or espionage depicted as spectacular events in movies whose main characters are named James Bond or Jason Bourne. However, while such movies are closer to fantasy than reality, other motion pictures and television series could have real value as educational tools in teaching students about HUMINT.

HUMINT does have a long history in shaping the fate of empires and nations, and many of these real events have been depicted in countless books, motion pictures and television series. Over the past several years there have been a variety of movies, television series and mini-series that are based on or inspired by real world events where HUMINT is an important component of the plot line. Many of these movies, television series and mini-series also had non-fiction books that chronicle the events on which they are based. Examples of television shows and movies that match this description include *Turn: Washington's Spies*, airing on AMC. The series is based on the book *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring*. The author,

³ "What Should They Learn," The Center for Education Reform, available at: <https://www.edreform.com/special-features/be-the-power/what-should-they-learn>.

⁴ Intercollegiate Studies Institute, *The Coming Crisis in Citizenship: Higher Education's Failure to Teach America's History and Institutions* (Wilmington, DE: American Civic Literacy Program, 2006), available at: http://www.soe.vt.edu/highered/files/Perspectives_PolicyNews/09-06/TheComingCrisis.pdf.

⁵ Ryan Sprau, "I saw it in the Movies: Suggestions for Incorporating Film and Experiential Learning in the College History Survey Course," *College Student Journal* 35 (March, 2001): 101.

⁶ "INTElligence: Human Intelligence," Central Intelligence Agency, April 30, 2013, available at: <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2010-featured-story-archive/intelligence-human-intelligence.html>.

Alexander Rose, even serves as a historical consultant for the show.⁷ In terms of major motion pictures, *Zero Dark Thirty* is a dramatic portrayal of the near-decade-long search for Osama bin Laden, which is also chronicled in a number of non-fiction books, including *Manhunt* by Peter Bergen. The mini-series *The Assets* is based on *Circle of Treason: A CIA Account of Traitor Aldrich Ames and The Men He Betrayed*, a memoir written by Sandy Grimes and Jeanne Vertefeuille, who were part of a five-person CIA team tasked with hunting down a mole inside the agency who eventually was identified as Aldrich Ames.⁸ Unfortunately the show was cancelled after ABC aired just two of the eight episodes, though all eight episodes are available for purchase on sites such as Amazon.

The television show *The American* that airs on the FX network is different than the three examples above in that it is not based on specific historical events. The show was inspired by events in 2010, after an FBI investigation revealed ten Russian spies had been living undercover in suburbs nationwide for more than a decade. While these spies were the inspiration for the show, *The Americans* takes place in the Washington, D.C. area in the early 1980s backdrop of the Cold War.⁹ The show is not based on specific events, but it was described by former KGB General Oleg Kalugin as expertly authentic and surprisingly historically accurate; and according to former senior KGB and U.S. intelligence officials, *The Americans* rings surprisingly true and relevant—even today.¹⁰ Whether based on real events or inspired by real cases, do films, television series and mini-series have value in teaching the complex concepts and issues related to HUMINT?

Film and Television as a Teaching Tool

⁷ Carolyn Eastman, “The Revolution Takes a Turn: AMC’s Drama about Washington’s Spies Aims for Moral Complexity,” *Perspectives on History*, April, 2014, available at: <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-2014/the-revolution-takes-a-turn>.

⁸ “The Assets’: Key Players in the Takedown of a CIA Officer Turned Soviet Spy,” *ABC News*, December 31, 2013, available at: <http://abcnews.go.com/US/assets-key-players-takedown-cia-officer-turned-soviet/story?id=21323443>.

⁹ Olivia B. Waxman, “Q&A: The CIA Officer Behind the New Spy Drama ‘The Americans,’” *Time*, January 30, 2013, available at: <http://entertainment.time.com/2013/01/30/qa-the-cia-officer-behind-the-new-spy-drama-the-americans>.

¹⁰ Kevin Randall, “From Tradecraft to Sexpionage, Cold War K.G.B. and U.S. Spies Concur: *The Americans* Actually Happened,” *Vanity Fair*, May 21, 2014, available at: <http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/05/the-americans-real>.

The exploration of the value of using film and television as a teaching tool is nothing new. Almost ninety years ago, A.L. Young sought to answer the question “of what value are motion pictures in instruction?”¹¹ Young did a simple experiment with students in grades six to nine who were studying agriculture. One group was taught using textbooks and lectures. The other group viewed films produced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the International Harvester Company that were closely related to subject matters in the textbooks. The students in each group were then given identical tests on the material covered.¹² What Young’s experiment showed was that students in the classes that viewed the films scored between sixteen and twenty-four points higher on the test than those who were taught using textbooks and lectures.¹³ The problem with Young’s study is that the films being shown to students were meant to be educational, not primarily for entertainment like the film and television shows listed above. However, there are many others who support the use of entertainment-focused film and television in education.

Some of the benefits of using movies and television in the classroom include extending the learning beyond the textbook, such as helping students get a feel for an era or an event, interest building, presenting information in numerous ways to better help students understand topics, and providing teachable moments based on specific scenes or topics portrayed.¹⁴ There are even websites that provide lesson plans based on movies and television shows.¹⁵ Sprau, in his article “I saw it in the Movies: Suggestions for Incorporating Film and Experiential Learning in the College History Survey Course,” describes how he incorporates film in teaching history in terms of David Kolb’s experiential learning theory. He believes that potential for instructional improvement in history using films within the framework of Kolb’s experiential learning mode is perhaps the greatest when instructors are faced with a wide array of students from majors with different learning strengths.¹⁶ This variety of students is often faced in intelligence courses that draw students from a wide array of disciplines such as political science, criminal justice and international relations.

¹¹ A. L. Young, “Teaching with Motion Pictures,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 3 (May, 1926): 321.

¹² Ibid, 322-3.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Melissa Kelly, “Pros and Cons of Using Movies in Class,” 712 Educators, available at: <http://712educators.about.com/od/curriculumandlessonplans/a/Pros-And-Cons-Of-Using-Movies-In-Class.htm>.

¹⁵ The website teachwithmovies.org is one example.

¹⁶ Sprau, “I saw it in the Movies.”

There are some inherent negative aspects of using movies and television series in the classroom. They can sometimes be very long and take up valuable classroom time, only certain parts would be appropriate for the classroom setting and truly provide an educational benefit, and there is a perception that watching movies is a bad method of teaching. One way to deal with some of these shortcomings is assigning the viewing of a particular movie or television show as homework and then viewing specific scenes or clips within the classroom. Gone are the days of a student having to go to the college library to view a movie on reserve. Today's technology provides a variety of platforms for an instructor to make a movie or television show available to a student. Likewise, technology has allowed for video clips to be inserted into PowerPoint slides or Prezi on a PC or Mac and shown in class. This allows the instructor to isolate those specific scenes most relevant to the course content to better manage class time, while allowing the students to view these scenes within the context of the entire movie or episode.

HUMINT in Film and Television

Over the past several years there have been a variety of movies, television series and mini-series that are based on or inspired by real-world events where the various concepts, issues and tradecraft related to HUMINT are portrayed. These include *Turn: Washington's Spies*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *The Assets*, and *The Americans*. While this list should not be considered all-inclusive or even the most valuable films and television shows where HUMINT is depicted, this group does provide a variety of angles for viewing the topic. Each show or movie has its own value in depicting sources of HUMINT as a whole but each also has many relevant scenes addressing specific issues, challenges and tradecraft such as reliability of sources, denial and deception, and steganography. They also provide a variety of historical contexts to HUMINT as well as depicting collection against both state and non-state actors. This is important because first, many techniques from the past are still used today. Second, because threats to security are not just posed by other nation-states but also terrorist groups, criminal organizations and narco-traffickers, each presents significant challenges in the collection of HUMINT.¹⁷

Turn: Washington's Spies

¹⁷ Althoff, "Human Intelligence," 50.

Turn, now in its second season, depicts the Culper Ring, a group of childhood friends spying for the Patriot cause and passing information on to George Washington during the American Revolution. The show is based on the book *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring* by Alexander Rose.¹⁸ This book serves as an excellent companion to the series and allows the instructor to put the show in proper historical context. The show highlights the dangers and challenges of collecting intelligence behind enemy lines while depicting the techniques utilized to relay this intelligence to those who need it. In the case of the Culper Ring, this was George Washington. The Culper Ring as a case study and *Turn* as a teaching tool have value in the study of contemporary HUMINT because many of the techniques used then are still used today, including coded communications, trusted intermediaries, dead drops, cover, and safe houses.¹⁹

Although *Turn* has only been on the air for two seasons, it already has provided numerous episodes and scenes that demonstrate these various techniques still in use today, the value of HUMINT in strategic and tactical planning, as well as the many pitfalls that are faced in HUMINT collection. One example is the use of dead drops and coded messages. In season one, episode two, viewers are introduced to how Anna Strong uses a petticoat to indicate to Patriot spy Caleb Brewster that a message is ready and the location of the dead drop location where it can be found. This is just one example of coded messages and encryption found throughout the first season of *Turn*. The first season features such techniques as the Cardano system, where a secret message is hidden within the longer text by using a grille to write in the true message and then the rest of the text filled in around it. The intended recipient, to decipher the message, then uses a similar grille or key.²⁰ The tradecraft of steganography is also introduced in season one. Steganography differs from encryption in that the message itself is hidden, not just its true meaning, so its existence is not known or uncertain at best.²¹ In *Turn* this method is utilized to send messages using hard-boiled eggs, alum, and vinegar. When the egg is passed, it is peeled, revealing the message on the outer portion of the white. Like dead drops, encryption and steganography are tradecraft still in use today.

¹⁸ Melissa Crawley, "Engaging Espionage on 'Turn: Washington's Spies,'" *Ionia Sentinel – Standard*, May 18, 2015, available at: <http://www.sentinel-standard.com/article/20150518/BLOGS/305189999/-1/news>.

¹⁹ Althoff, "Human Intelligence," 55.

²⁰ Rose, Alexander, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring* (New York: Random House, 2006), 56.

²¹ Lowenthal, *Intelligence*, 97.

Turn has value beyond teaching tradecraft. As the name of the show suggests, it is about the recruitment of spies. Today, HUMINT largely consists of officers recruiting individuals to do the actual spying. The process of recruiting spies is known as the acquisition cycle, consisting of targeting, assessing, recruiting, handling, and termination. During the handling phase the source is developed to establish the rules for receiving information, holding meetings and transmitting information.²² Throughout season one we see Abraham Woodhull subjected to the first four steps of the agent acquisition cycle to spy on behalf of George Washington. Various scenes throughout the first season can be used to demonstrate these phases. Once a source is established, they may begin recruiting or relying on sub-sources of their own making that can be transmitted to the original source's handler.²³ This is a process that we begin to see unfolding in season two as Woodhull begins the process of recruiting Robert Townsend to be a New York-based agent for the Culper Ring. In the series, Townsend is the proprietor of a boarding house in New York that provides rooms and meals to British personnel and is uniquely positioned to obtain sensitive information from his guests. It is as a guest that Woodhull first spots Townsend, assesses his value as a sub-source and makes a pitch to recruit him. In reality, Woodhull and Townsend knew each other and would occasionally see each other in New York while staying at the boarding house owned by a mutual friend of their two families, not Townsend as depicted on the show.²⁴ While the depiction of the relationship of Woodhull and Townsend may not be historically accurate, like many other scenes throughout the series, it provides valuable teachable moments.

The Assets

Another espionage-related television series, though short-lived, based on a non-fiction account of real-life events was the ABC mini-series *The Assets*. The mini-series was based on the real-life adventures of CIA counterintelligence officer Sandy Grimes and her partner Jeanne Vertefeuille as they searched to find a mole within who would turn out to be the most notorious traitor in U.S. history, Aldrich Ames.²⁵ The series is based on Grimes and Vertefeuille's *Circle of Treason: A CIA Account of Traitor Aldrich Ames and the Men He Betrayed*. As with *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring* for *Turn*, this book can serve as an excellent

²² Ibid, 102-103.

²³ Ibid, 103.

²⁴ Rose, *Washington's Spies*, 132-133.

²⁵ Internet Movie Database, *The Assets* Plot Summary, available at: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3074646/plotsummary?ref_=tt_ql_7.

companion to the series. However, since both the book and the series are based on firsthand accounts, they approach the events from the perspective of the authors and real-life main characters. Nonetheless, both the series and the book are excellent teaching tools for instructors on a wide variety of topics related to intelligence and counterintelligence. It has particular value in highlighting the benefits and pitfalls of one specific source of HUMINT, the walk-in.

Walk-ins, at their most basic definition, are individuals who volunteer information or to be sources of information. Walk-ins can include defectors, individuals with access to intelligence information of interest that renounce allegiance to the country they are serving and seek refuge or support in another. Walk-ins are a potential treasure trove of intelligence, especially if they are defectors who were well-placed officials with broad access to protected information, but they are not without their drawbacks.²⁶ The drawbacks include a host of questions regarding the reliability of the source: Why have they volunteered the information? Do they really have the access and information they claim? Are they not really defecting but rather working as the agent of an adversary, which is referred to as a dangle? Dangles can be used as a means of entrapment, identifying hostile intelligence personnel, or gaining insight into an adversary's intelligence needs, sources and methods.²⁷

The main focus of the series is Aldrich Ames, a thirty-one-year veteran of the CIA, who had been spying for the Soviet Union since 1985 when he secretly volunteered to KGB officers at the Soviet Embassy in Washington and passed classified information about CIA and FBI human sources, as well as technical operations targeting the Soviet Union.²⁸ The plot line of *The Assets*, however, actually follows the activities of walk-ins on both sides of the Cold War. The series portrays the death of General Dmitri Polyakov, one of the highest-value sources in the history of the United States. Polyakov began working for U.S. intelligence in 1961 while working at the Soviet Mission to the United Nations when he contacted FBI counterintelligence agents and volunteered his services. He remained a valuable source for the United States until his arrest and subsequent execution in 1988, a direct result of information provided by Ames.²⁹ In episode two, viewers are also introduced to Vitaly Yurchenko, a

²⁶ William Costanza, "Human Intelligence," in Gregory Moore (ed.), *Encyclopedia of U.S. Intelligence* (Boca Raton, FL: Auerbach Publications, 2014).

²⁷ Lowenthal, *Intelligence*, 105.

²⁸ "Famous Cases & Criminals: Aldrich Hazen Ames," Federal Bureau of Investigation, available at: <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/history/famous-cases/aldrich-hazen-ames>.

²⁹ Elena Shannon Washington, "Death of The Perfect Spy," *Time*, June 24, 2001, available at: <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,164863,00.html>.

high-ranking KGB officer who defects to the United States in Rome. This episode and those that follow show how walk-ins are debriefed and that the information they provide is often met with skepticism. Interestingly, after three months Yurchenko re-defected back to the Soviets. There are those who believe he was actually a dangle still working for his masters in Moscow and played along with his CIA interrogators in order to draw attention away from Ames.³⁰ Regardless of whether Yurchenko was or was not a dangle, like many other scenes in the series, those featuring Yurchenko provide valuable teaching points related to the value and risks associated with walk-ins.

Zero Dark Thirty

While *The Assets* takes place against the backdrop of the Cold War, *Zero Dark Thirty* takes place in a post-9/11 world. Here, the threat is from non-state actors such as terrorist organizations and the need for intelligence collection operations against them is recognized. In fact, the movie opens with an actual recording of emergency phone calls made by office workers in the World Trade Center after the planes struck the buildings and before the towers collapsed. The movie is a docudrama based on the decade-long hunt for al-Qaida leader Usama bin Laden after the September 2001 attacks until his death in Pakistan in May 2011. Unlike *Turn* or *The Assets*, *Zero Dark Thirty* is not based on a specific work of non-fiction. There is, however, no shortage of books and other sources available about those events portrayed in the movie for instructors to use to put various scenes in the movie in historical perspective or context.

In terms of terrorism, HUMINT can provide the names of individuals within terrorist organizations, their movements, their responsibilities, their resources, safe houses, and recruitment and communication techniques. It can serve as a catalyst for other collection disciplines, such as signals intelligence (SIGINT) and geospatial intelligence (GEOINT).³¹ This collection on terrorists and their networks is dramatized throughout *Zero Dark Thirty*. Also, while both *Turn* and *The Assets* focus on covert HUMINT, in *Zero Dark Thirty* overt HUMINT collecting plays a major role, specifically the interrogation of prisoners and detainees. The movie's opening scene is the interrogation of an al-Qaida operative, a scene that is repeated throughout the movie.

³⁰ Christian Carly, "Angle of Defection," *Foreign Policy*, July 16, 2010, available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/07/16/angle-of-defection>.

³¹ Althoff, "Human Intelligence," 72.

The prominence of detainee interrogation throughout the movie provides many teachable moments. First, the visual portrayal of enhanced interrogation techniques can serve as a great catalyst for class discussions on the utility and ethics of using such techniques in gathering HUMINT. Second, it shows how obtaining a small piece of information can have significant ramifications. In one scene, the operative seen interrogated in the beginning reveals the name Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, the courier who would eventually lead the U.S. to bin Laden's compound. In that scene, the operative reveals that he had seen al-Kuwaiti a year earlier and that he was in possession of a letter from bin Laden. In reality it was Mohamed al-Qahtani, the twentieth hijacker, who revealed al-Kuwaiti as "a key player in al Qaeda and a confidant of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed."³² The subsequent scenes also demonstrate the need to collaborate or gauge the importance of information once received as Maya, the main character in the movie, watches video of other detainees confirming the existence of al-Kuwaiti and his importance.

The movie also demonstrates some of the many pitfalls of HUMINT. One problem with overt collection, regardless of techniques used to elicit information, is there is no guarantee that your source will provide the information sought. The source may also provide false information to intentionally mislead or deny having information, in essence, performing denial and deception on an individual level, a scene we see play out in the movie as Maya is interrogating Abu Faraj al-Libi about al-Kuwaiti. In reality, several key al-Qaida figures denied or downplayed al-Kuwaiti's importance to the organization. Jose A. Rodriguez, former director of the CIA's National Clandestine Service, recounts when Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was asked about al-Kuwaiti his "eyes grew wide and he backed up into his cell. He said no words but spoke volumes with his actions."³³ Similarly, Abu Faraj al Libi, former al-Qaida operations chief, vehemently denied any knowledge of al-Kuwaiti, a denial that Rodriguez assessed "was so vociferous that it was obvious to us that he was trying to hide something important."³⁴ Clearly reliability, credibility, and denial and deception are all important topics when dealing with HUMINT that could be discussed using this scene. The real examples of Mohammed and al Libi have particular value when discussing denial and deception. Their denials highlight how it is often necessary to apply "Gertrude's Law," a reference to the character Gertrude in

³² Bergen, Peter, *Manhunt: The Ten-Year Search for Bin Laden, from 9/11 to Abbottabad* (New York: Crown, 2012), 98.

³³Rodriguez, Jose A., *Hard Measures: How Aggressive CIA Actions After 9/11 Saved American Lives* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 110.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 111.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* who is famous for her quote, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." Thus a forceful denial is often more important than an admission.

Zero Dark Thirty also does an excellent job highlighting the challenges of collecting on non-state actors and individuals versus nation-states. These individuals have networks that are fluid and ever-changing. Compared to states, whose locations and those of their strategic assets are often known and often easier to monitor, non-state actors' locations may change often, making it difficult to find them, monitor them or get assets close to them. This difficulty is demonstrated in the movie as al-Kuwaiti is finally located in Pakistan and his movements are tracked using a variety of sources on the ground. The other major challenge is the sheer damage of covert collection on non-state actors. This is dramatically demonstrated by the suicide attack at Khost carried out by an individual the CIA believed to be a valuable source with access to the highest level of al-Qaida. Nine people were killed, including seven Americans, and six others were seriously wounded in the attack. Collecting intelligence has always been a risky business, as demonstrated by the eighty-seven stars carved into the marble of the CIA Memorial Wall. But if an attack like the one at Khost were to be carried out by a nation-state, it would likely be considered an act of war. Non-state actors like terrorist organizations need not show such restraint. This is demonstrated by the fact that two dozen stars have been added to the Memorial Wall since 9/11.

The Americans

The rise of non-state actors as a threat to security and a target of HUMINT collection does not mean that nation-states have ceased to be targets or threats. Perhaps no case illustrates this more than Operation Ghost Stories, the FBI decade-long investigation against the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) operative that resulted in the arrests of ten Russian spies in 2010.³⁵ While there has yet to be a major motion picture or series made of the SVR "illegals," as they were called,³⁶ the "Illegals" program was inspiration for the series *The Americans*, which airs on the cable channel FX. The illegals worked real jobs while leading seemingly normal lives with normal families, even assuming false identities with Americanized names, just like the main

³⁵ "Operation Ghost Stories: Inside the Russian Spy Case," Federal Bureau of Investigation, October 31, 2011, available at: http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2011/october/russian_103111/russian_103111.

³⁶ Ibid.

characters on the show.³⁷ *The Americans*, while inspired by true events, takes place in the 1980s against the backdrop of the Cold War and unlike *Turn*, *The Assets*, and *Zero Dark Thirty* is not based on a specific real case. Despite the show being a work of fiction, the events of the plot are real, as is much of the tradecraft used throughout the series. For example, the KGB had a program aimed at acquiring technical knowledge from the West through clandestine means. In early 1982, the FBI and CIA began feeding the Soviets technological information that was intentionally altered to pass acceptance testing by scientists and engineers but fails once put into use, some of which found its way into Soviet military equipment.³⁸ This is portrayed in the show when one of the Soviet spies learns from his handler that a secret plan for a U.S. submarine propeller he had stolen earlier was faulty, causing a Soviet submarine using the technology to sink and all 160 men onboard to die.

The Americans also has value as an example of another source of HUMINT, sleepers. Covert agents operating in a foreign country need to have a reason for being there. These reasons are called cover stories and fall into two broad categories: official cover and nonofficial cover. Official cover is one in which the agent appears to have another position in the government, which makes it easier for them to maintain contact with their superiors and often affords them diplomatic immunity if they are identified. Agents with nonofficial cover have no overt link between them and their government and thus need to maintain full-time jobs or other reasons to justify being in-country.³⁹ A sleeper is an agent with a nonofficial cover who spends a significant period of time integrating into the society of the target country but does not become immediately active.⁴⁰ This is the type of nonofficial cover that is portrayed in *The Americans*, which provides many scenes that can be used to demonstrate tradecraft, including dead drops, covert communication, and source recruitment. The show also delineates many of the challenges faced by sleepers in terms of maintaining their cover and overcoming counterintelligence measures while at the same time engaging in espionage.

Conclusion

³⁷ Alex Garofalo, "The Americans' True Story: Who Were The Real-Life Spies That Inspired The FX Show?" *International Business Times*, January 28, 2015, available at: <http://www.ibtimes.com/americans-true-story-who-were-real-life-spies-inspired-fx-show-1798070>.

³⁸ Althoff, "Human Intelligence," 47.

³⁹ Lowenthal, *Intelligence*, 104.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 104-5.

For nearly a century, movies and then television have been used as teaching tools in a wide variety of disciplines, including history, political science and international relations. Previous studies have found that movies, television and videos can serve as excellent tools for promoting and enhancing education⁴¹ and, in combination with appropriate readings, provide a fruitful alternative to a traditional lesson.⁴² Based on this previous research, this paper examined how film and television can be used as a tool for teaching the various concepts, issues, and challenges, as well as the legal and ethical matters surrounding the collection of HUMINT, including tradecraft, source acquisition, denial and deception, and torture. In addition, movies and television allow instructors to overcome some key hurdles when teaching HUMINT, such as the secretive nature of covert collection techniques and a lack of knowledge or interest in history among students. In addition, movies and films allow students to see and feel the emotions and personal ramifications, both physical and mental, involved in the collection of HUMINT. In short, they portray the human in HUMINT.

This article specifically examined how the television shows *Turn: Washington's Spies*, *The Assets*, and *The Americans*, and the movie *Zero Dark Thirty*, can be utilized to teach a variety of covert sources of HUMINT including source acquisition, walk-ins, and agents working clandestinely in foreign countries, as well as overt methods such as interrogation of prisoners and detainees. This list of shows and movies is not to be considered an exhaustive list of those with value as a tool for teaching HUMINT, nor is the value of these shows limited to the examples provided. Rather, this paper only seeks to provide examples of how film and television can be used in combination with traditional teaching tools. Books and articles on the events that inspired these examples can provide a deeper understanding of HUMINT as a whole. Whether viewing entire movies or episodes of a series, utilizing specific scenes, or a combination of the two, television and film have great value in overcoming some of the challenges facing instructors and enhancing more traditional methods for teaching HUMINT.

⁴¹ Sprau, "I saw it in the Movies."

⁴² Stefan Engert and Alexander Spencer, "International Relations at the Movies: Teaching and Learning about International Politics through Film," *Perspectives: Review of International Affairs* 1 (2009): 99.