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(U) Are YOU the SIGINT Philosopher?

FROM: SIDtoday

Run Date: 11/30/2010

(U) "Thought-provoking"

"Fascinating!"

"Original and absorbing"

...What are these quotations referring to? A new column on *SIDtoday* -- authored (perhaps) by none other than YOU!

(U) *SIDtoday* is looking for a SIGINT philosopher among the workforce to write a column (monthly or every other month -- negotiable) that will really get people thinking. Would you like to apply? Send us a sample essay, and our panel of judges will review your submission to see whether you have what it takes to be the "Socrates of SIGINT"!

(U//FOUO) The author whose sample essay is deemed the most interesting, relevant, thought-provoking and enjoyable to read will be offered a columnist spot. Give it a try -- what's there to lose? Send a sample essay (1 page or so) by 17 December to [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] for consideration.

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(U) Are Obscure Languages Still... Obscure?

FROM: (U//FOUO) [REDACTED]

Run Date: 01/11/2012

(U//FOUO) *Editor's intro: A SID language analyst takes a plunge into the obscure (by studying a little-known African language) and winds up (a little bit) famous.*

(U//FOUO) When you work with people who are brilliant, but are yourself merely reasonably bright, you feel you have to be willing to do things nobody else wants to do. That's been my career path. I volunteer for almost anything I think I can do and a few things I'm not at all sure I can do. Almost two years ago, I chose to cross-train from being a language analyst in Korean -- a language I had worked for almost fifteen years -- to try to learn a language I'd never heard of. My chief motivation was that although I felt I was *good* at my job, I was surrounded by people who I thought were *great*. So I decided to attempt to work in a language I thought was important, but one in which NSA had not yet grown a deep pool of talent.

(S//SI//REL) I chose Tigrinya, a language spoken by 7 million people in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Its strategic importance comes largely from two factors. One is that the government of Ethiopia is dominated by ethnic Tigrayans, so Tigrinya has semi-official status among policy-makers. Secondly, the tiny nation of Eritrea is thought to play a role

in destabilizing many of the weak nation-states in the Horn of Africa by training, funding, and possibly arming insurgent groups. Because the nations Eritrea is involved in include Somalia and Sudan, two important nations to U.S. national interests, Tigrinya has a higher importance than would be apparent by the relatively low number of speakers.

(U//FOUO) When I started my training, I realized I had gone to the right language if I wanted to take the road less travelled. Including me, my class had a total of... one student. My instructor and I used the only two Tigrinya grammar books written in English for the first few months. One of them was written by a missionary forty years ago. The other borrows heavily from the first.

(U//FOUO) After that, I scoured the internet for movies, news, books, music -- anything we could find in Tigrinya. I found to my surprise that even in this day and age, it is still hard to find a lot of what a non-native linguist really needs for less-commonly-taught-languages (LCTL). In Korean, there are thousands of videos on-line that are well-subtitled. But in Tigrinya, there are few videos anywhere that have reliable subtitling. There is one Tigrinya novel available online, and it has no English translation.

(S//SI//REL) When I finished class, I found I was able to function reasonably well on the job. That was good, because for much of my work, I was very much performing without a net. In Korean, I was used to anything I did being checked over (perhaps too much for my own liking) at least once. There was a well-established quality-checking process that was at once restricting and reassuring. Here, if I *say* something is so, it *is* so. You can imagine how terrifying this feels if you are saying Eritrea is selling weapons to a rebel group in Sudan based on your gut perception of nuances of a language you'd never heard of two years ago.

(S//SI//REL) It has been eye-opening coming from a major production language to an LCTL. Our testing experience is entirely different from the big languages, because ours are literally made one at a time. Our online dictionary only partially works, and has only one 20 year-old dictionary as a source. I still cannot type at work using native text, despite eight months of trying various technical tricks (and even though I have been typing in Tigrinya at home since the first week of class). Everything is different about working an LCTL.

(S//SI//REL) Although we do have contract native linguists I can send difficult material to, I cannot sit with them and ask why what was said means what it means. Sometimes, there are roadblocks in the language I just cannot get around. And that is the crux of the work I now do -- being smart enough to know when I don't know something. My co-workers, many of whom have been working in LCTLs for decades, are not so much trainers as they are inspirational models of tenacity.

(U//FOUO) If you have ever thought of cross-training into an LCTL, perhaps allured, as I was, by the romance of sailing into unknown waters, I'm not here to stop you. I've felt richly rewarded for my decision, and I've done some of the most valuable work I've done at the Agency in the short time since I cross-trained. But be ye warned -- for much of your sailing, you'll be off the map.

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(U) The SIGINT Philosopher Is Back -- with a New Face!

FROM: [REDACTED] the SIDtoday Editor

Run Date: 05/29/2012

(U//FOUO) Last year SIDtoday introduced the SIGINT Philosopher column, penned by [REDACTED]. The column was well received, but unfortunately Mr [REDACTED]'s other work commitments have made it impossible for him to continue writing the column. We thank Mr [REDACTED] for his contributions to SIDtoday and wish him well in his career!

(U//FOUO) Today we can announce the *new* SIGINT Philosopher columnist, [REDACTED]. While Mr [REDACTED] does not hold a degree in philosophy, as you'll see, he does have a philosophical approach to things, as well as a sense of humor. So, without further delay, we present Mr [REDACTED] first column:

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(U) Since I've become the new SIGINT philosopher -- a position whose very existence will undo the good work of generations of parents who wisely begged their children not to major in philosophy because they will starve -- I suppose I should be clear what I mean by the term "philosophy." It is one of those words that can have many different meanings, ranging all the way from Plato to corporate mission statements to any kind of folk wisdom:, e.g.:

Andrew: I can't believe the Ravens blew that game.

Chris: Well, some days, you eat the bear, and some days, the bear eats you.

Andrew: Wow, man. That's deep. You're so philosophical. But to me, philosophy is useful only to the extent it can help you figure out what to do with your life. And since I am the **SIGINT** philosopher, in this column I'll try to talk about questions that are relevant to what we all do at work every day. Call it "applied philosophy with a SIGINT slant" with possible gratuitous insertions of Heidegger just to make me sound smart.

(U) One philosophical SIGINT conundrum that faces many of us SIGINTers is the feeling famously expressed by Herbert Hoover's Secretary of State, Henry Stimson, that "gentlemen do not read other gentlemen's mail."

(S//REL) While almost everyone would agree this is a hopelessly quixotic sentiment, and one doomed to be ignored by every nation on earth, I was surprised when I began working here to be assigned to a diplomatic target. Somehow, it didn't sit well with me at first that we (the US) would invest big money and effort into eavesdropping on the same people we negotiated with. It was as if with the right hand of our State Department we shook their hand, while with the left hand of the Defense Department we reached into their coat pockets. Surely, I thought, if there were any place in the world that idealism should rule and we should show voluntary restraint in our intelligence work, diplomacy was that place. Terrorists who meant harm to children and puppies were one thing, but civil servants talking about work while schlepping their kids to soccer practice seemed a little too close to home.

(U) Last year, I unwittingly stumbled across what feels to me like a good answer to this question during, of all things, my polygraph examination.

(U) I'm a libertarian by nature. I like to be left alone. Polygraphs to me are a unique kind of torture. Like many

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analysts in SID, I also make them worse for myself by analyzing and obsessing each question to death. Last year, a day before my birthday, I had a really terrible polygraph that I knew I had not passed. I spent a month obsessing over it, wondering how I would find a new job, and launching into long internal diatribes berating a society in which it is no longer possible for me to take my family in a wagon out to the prairie and claim a plot of land by a creek and live in a mud cabin.

(U) One of the many thoughts that continually went through my mind was that if I had to reveal part of my personal life to my employer, I'd really rather reveal ***ALL*** of it rather than just part of it. Partial revelation, such as the fact that answering question X made my pulse quicken, led to misunderstandings. I found myself wishing that my life would be constantly and completely monitored. It might seem odd that a self-professed libertarian would wish an Orwellian dystopia on himself, but here was my rationale: If people knew a few things about me, I might seem suspicious. But if people knew everything about me, they'd see they had nothing to fear.*

(U) This is the attitude I have brought to SIGINT work since then. If we are going to work on targets that fall short of being technically "enemies" but are rather informative for our policy makers -- and we are -- then even looking at it from the target's perspective, we are honor-bound to do ***more*** and ***better*** monitoring rather than less.

(U) For while the US does not truly have godlike powers --we cannot do all things -- we do have extraordinary powers. And we tend to mistrust what we do not understand well. A target that has no ill will to the US, but which is being monitored, needs better and more monitoring, not less. So if we're in for a penny, we need to be in for a pound. From the perspective of the US, obviously it is in our interest to understand a target better. But even for the target (if we, like Stimson, are going to chivalrously concern ourselves for him), it is better to be completely and competently monitored rather than halfheartedly and incompetently so.

(U) I guess if we were a corporation, we could make our mission statement (or "corporate philosophy") this: "building informed decision makers -- so that targets do not suffer our nation's wrath unless they really deserve it -- by exercising deity-like monitoring of the target." Now that's philosophy.

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(U) The SIGINT Philosopher: Descartes Would Have Been a Lousy SIGINT Reporter

FROM: (U//FOUO) [REDACTED]

Run Date: 06/15/2012

(U) I am about to go back on my word, and in only my second entry as the SIGINT Philosopher. I said I wasn't generally interested in Philosophy as an academic pursuit -- I was a goals-oriented philosopher. But here I'm about to get all abstract and epistemological.*

(U//FOUO) Perhaps this can't be helped. Most NSA employees -- not just in SID -- are intelligent, thoughtful, somewhat introspective people. After we've been here for a while, we start to ask fundamental questions about the meaning of our work. For those of us in SID who are in the business of interpreting SIGINT, those questions often revolve around how best to share the information that SIGINT gives us with others in the Intelligence Community.

(S//SI//REL) NSA hasn't always reported SIGINT the way it does today. Currently, we task, collect, scan, translate or decrypt as necessary, and then try to interpret the raw

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decrypt as necessary, and then try to interpret the raw information by writing reports that present the facts as a finished SIGINT report. But in the past -- a past that increasingly few here remember -- we used to simply pass along raw collections and translations to the customers. When I worked with [REDACTED] version of NSA, I saw that their reporting was the same thing -- basically just transcriptions of intercepts with short context statements tacked on.

(C//REL) Like many in S2, I both translate SIGINT and report it. I also have a hand in the collections process through tasking selectors. This gives me a reasonably wide vantage point of the intelligence through a number of stages. That vantage point often leaves me feeling that there is a lot lacking in the final product that goes to customers. SIGINT is usually partial information. Two communicants share information on a subject for which they have context that the analyst lacks. These communicants may or may not fully understand what they are talking about. So information is missing from the beginning. Add to this the fact that errors -- or at least difficult renderings -- can occur in translation. The information is already several steps removed from fact (or dare I say from "truth"?) by the time a transcript is finished and I begin to write a report on it.

(U//FOUO) SIGINT analysts who report do an amazing job of puzzling out what their collection means. They also are careful to separate what they know and what they think they know by using words like "probably," "possibly," and "I've only been working here for three weeks." But however brilliantly we may report the information, I can't help thinking that we are essentially another node in the "telephone game":

real information communicants talking about real
information collection translation reporting

(U//FOUO) That's a lot of steps before it ever gets to one of our customers. To make matters epistemologically worse, those customers typically use our reports to then write ANOTHER report for their customers. Usually, when I see an assessment from somewhere in the IC that has something I disagree with in it, the origin can be traced to this long supply chain of information.

(C//REL) Of course, good translation, good reporting, and good collaboration with customers can alleviate these issues.

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And as one reporting legend in my office who remembers the old days tells me, almost nobody -- our customers included -- wants to go back to just dumping raw information downstream. As many are pointing out now as we discuss these very issues as part of analytic modernization, the logistical hurdles we would have to endure (USSID 18 training for the entire IC, anyone?) to move our customers more upstream in the information chain are possibly more troublesome than the knowledge gaps that occur through our current system. So this may all be a wistful, empty complaint without a proffered solution. How like a philosopher of me.

(U//FOUO) But the philosopher in my head doesn't really care about practical issues like these. He just knows that this is all unsatisfying somehow. He doesn't like presenting something to others as knowledge when it is really just my interpretation of knowledge. It is my painting of a scene that somebody else has described to me.

(U//FOUO) But enough from that gadfly philosopher. I have reports to write. I know -- I'll tell the philosophy professor in my head that they're cutting his department's funding to fund a new locker room for the football team. He'll be fuming so much, I won't hear from him for months.

Notes:

* Epistemology, "the study of knowledge" is a branch of philosophy that answers annoying questions like "What does it mean to know something?" or "How do you know that you know something?" Its chief purpose, according to the possibly apocryphal memoirs of Leucippus, is to allow philosophy professors to feel superior to us by deconstructing what we all feel to be common-sense answers to these questions.

(U//FOUO) The SIGINT Philosopher is interested to know what you think. Is the idea that customers should be able to hear what I hear and read my best translation word for word doctrinaire mumbo jumbo? Or is it something long overdue in the age of need to share? Is it a good idea that is just too impractical to work? Post your comments on the [Tapioca Pebble](#).

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(U) The SIGINT Philosopher: When Brevity Is Just the Soul of "Huh?"

FROM: (U//FOUO)

Run Date: 07/16/2012

(U) We've all written academic papers at some point, where your style is dictated by a need to sound smart. And many of us went through a needed -- albeit painful -- reprogramming when we came here to what, for lack of a better term, we'll call the "real world." We had to learn to take out our parenthetical thoughts, our rhetorically brilliant dependent clauses, our florid and flashy flourishes. People are busy, we were told. Just state the BLUE.*

(U) Eventually, I was able to adapt to the new Spartan paradigm of writing. I remembered Norman Maclean's memoir "A River Runs Through It" where he described his father teaching him to get to the point in writing. Maclean would be assigned an essay, which he would take to his father. His father would then tell him to make it half as long. Maclean would shorten it, show it to his father again, then be told once more to make it half as long. Once he achieved an essay that was now one-fourth its original length, his father

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would tell him to throw it in the trash, and Maclean was at last let loose to go fishing.

(U) However, I have noted that at times *some carry this verbal frugality too far*. One supervisor I had -- one who chided me often for being too verbose when I wrote e-mails -- used to write e-mails to our team that always ended with us looking puzzled at one another. It wasn't that he *couldn't* make sense. It was that he *left too much information out*. Inevitably, one of us would have to send back a response asking for clarification. The response to that request would then typically lead to more questions. Eventually, this supervisor would give up, come speak to the team personally, and then we would work through everything. By then, the whole cycle had taken much longer than one slightly more complete e-mail would have taken to begin with.

(U) I am perhaps treading into waters ruled by Zelda or Grammar Geek, but as our writing impacts our ability to understand our discourse with one another, I'll claim just a small piece of this zone as the realm of philosophy. And I entreat you all, as sub-warden of this zone: ***Be brief, but also be complete.*** People are too busy NOT to give them all the information they need to understand what you are saying the FIRST time you send it.

(U) And now, I will conclude with a paragraph that my editor will no doubt delete. It is a self-indulgent digression, replete with Baroque sentence constructions. Part of it has to do with King Sejong's creation of the Korean alphabet, and there is a breathtaking description of Henri Saint Cyr's 1952 equestrian gold medal performance. It's a pity you're too busy to read it, really.

[paragraph deleted]

* (U) BLUF does not mean, as I thought, to pretend you know something, which is too bad, because I'm really good at that. It's one of those annoying acronyms that pop up. It means "bottom line up front."

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(U) The SIGINT Philosopher: In Praise of Not Knowing

FROM: (U//FOUO) [REDACTED]

Run Date: 08/16/2012

(U) I have to begin with a complaint. Hopefully, this will not incite a war with our [IAD](#) comrades, but my beef is really with IT types. You've ruined a great word. If you Google the word "agnostic" on your NSANet browser right now, you will find the results rife with tech-y terms like these:

- The PW storage environment is agnostic regarding...
- Comcast's protocol-agnostic...
- Application layer is bearer agnostic...

(U) ...and so on. In all those uses, "agnostic" means something like "indifferent to." This tech-y use of the word has even snuck out into the common vernacular; a leader once called on SID to become "geographically agnostic."

(U) But that's not what the word means. As the classically trained analyst who sits across from me will attest, its Greek roots literally mean "without knowledge." An "agnostic" in

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religious terms is someone who is uncertain about God's existence, and who possibly believes the question is unknowable. But that doesn't mean agnostics don't care whether God exists.

(S//SI//REL) I ascend this arcane etymological soapbox not just because a word has been abused. Words change meaning in any language, and there's naught I can do about it. But *the admission that one does not know something is really an excellent intellectual exercise*. I recall one time, while stationed at [REDACTED] when I briefed the [REDACTED] Ministry of National Defense on a [REDACTED] military exercise. The [REDACTED] had just gotten done giving eleven hypotheses. I explained simply that we weren't sure. The General looked at his countrymen and said, "If you don't know, say you don't know like the Americans."

(C//REL) The IC is full of questions to which we do not know the answer. And yet we are smart, ambitious, conscientious people who were hired to answer those questions, dagnabit, and so we go about trying to answer them industriously. We can take one of two approaches. First, we can write our best guesses, and couch them with all sorts of qualifying language. This is the approach some take with

[REDACTED] Although we may know less about [REDACTED] than any country on earth, hardly a day goes by when my "highlights of IC reporting" e-mail doesn't have a [REDACTED] report in it, in which some industrious thinker has just pontificated that [REDACTED] might be open to the West because Mickey Mouse appeared in a [REDACTED] parade. Just by volume, you'd think we actually knew a lot about this country.

(U//FOUO) NSA often takes a second approach, where we attempt to address a very small subset of an important question. Say there is an intelligence need (IN) for Zendian economic information. People want to know how the main sectors of the Zendian economy are performing, whether the needs of the people are being met, and what the high-level plans are to direct the economy. Reasonable questions. But NSA doesn't have the access to answer them. Their reclusive leaders do not use electronic communications we can target. Their missions abroad use triple pig-Latin encryption, and underlying it all is the darn Zendian language that nobody here can even speak. So what do we do? Well, it turns out we can get access to a Zendian gum-chewing manufacturer that has its operations based in the North Pole. So our Zendian Econ team writes 132 reports on Zendian gum sales under the

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6.

zendian economic IN. Analysts in other agencies are so happy to get anything, they report that they are grateful for the reporting, which leads leadership here to conclude the team is doing its mission.

(U//FOUO) Now, I've been in positions before where I was working the equivalent of the Zendian gum factory. There wasn't much I saw of use in the collection I had to work with. And if that's you, and that's where you find yourself, you absolutely should try to do something rather than nothing. You're a civil servant, and you should do the best you can to give value for your paycheck.

(U//FOUO) But it would also be nice for those laboring on these kinds of missions to have their leaders occasionally recognize how little we really know.* Often, in their understandable desire to keep morale high and fight for resources, they tend to always focus on the positive: "We got 87 positive feedback reports from customers! Our customers love our stuff!" That's fine, but going overboard with this sort of thing can lead analysts to conclude they have gone crazy. *Occasionally hearing "you know, we just aren't able to answer the questions our customers really want" can actually be a refreshing bit of honesty.* A little (real) agnosticism would really help.

(U) This kind of honesty can help to "rip off the bandage" and reveal how difficult the task of good intelligence gathering really is. It can prevent throwing good money after bad when leadership believes its current efforts are working. It also helps maintain our ethos as honest, straight-shooting Americans.

(U) But, you know, whatever. I'm agnostic to the whole thing.

(U) Note:

*(U//FOUO) I realize some of you have great access and really can answer a lot of your customers' questions. For you, just know that I hate you, and click on over to a recent [Signal v Noise](#).

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(U) The SIGINT Philosopher: Unlike All My Terrible Teammates, I Am a Wonderful Teammate

FROM: (U//FOUO) [REDACTED]

Run Date: 09/17/2012

(U//FOUO) Like many of you, I recently finished providing my supervisor with written bullets summarizing my achievements to help her with the task of completing my yearly ACE assessment. As I sought for just the right phraseology that would demonstrate how irreplaceable I am, I found myself using phrases like "produced 50% of all reporting on a team of seven people," or "was the only team member who did such-and-such." They were all some version of indirectly saying "I am more productive than other people."

(U) Then, I had to complete bullets for the collaboration section, in which I tried desperately to show that while outperforming everyone else, I also somehow managed to help them out in such a way that they were more productive because of me. Which means I then had to talk about the great work done by those same people I supposedly outperformed blindfolded with my hands tied behind my

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outperformed blindfolded with my hands tied behind my back. This highlights what I think is an inherent weakness in our promotion system (and most promotion systems): *the people we're supposed to be cooperating with to get the job done are the same ones we're competing with for limited promotion and awards dollars.*

(U) My guess is that if you are thinking about getting promoted, it probably complicates your calculus somewhat when you are making decisions about how to spend your time in a day. If you are a subject-matter expert, and something really juicy and interesting but also difficult comes in, do you knock it out yourself, or do you spend extra time to have someone newer handle the work with guidance from you?

(U) Judging from many offices I've been in, I would say that at least sometimes, the prevailing prejudice is that *it's better to be able to take credit for doing something important without help than it is to claim you enabled others to do the same work*. If you think about it, it's also a much easier bullet to write. "Wrote 40% of reports on a team of eleven people" is easier to understand and sounds more impressive than "helped give a lot of people who were feeling underutilized a purpose in life by giving them stuff to do that mattered," or "helped someone to do a good job on it even though it took more time to do that than it would have taken to do it myself."

(U//FOUO) I work on a very small team, and so for most work, I don't have much choice but to do it myself. But I have felt this same tug in my own work, and confess I sometimes feel impatient while explaining things to others, because deep down, I sense it is hurting my ability to afford to send my son to MIT one day.*

(U) Almost everyone has mentoring as part of their objectives, but it is much easier to document "formal" mentoring, such as a role in a professional organization, than it is to document informal day-to-day helping out of the people around you. Lebron James (the basketball player) will never get the respect Michael Jordan did, because nobody cares that you found the open guy for the winning shot with five seconds left instead of taking the shot yourself. In fact, your office "Lebron" has it even worse than the real one does: there are no statistics to record *ad hoc* office assists.

(U) But assists should matter. When I worked at a large corporation once, they had a system to try to reward

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corporation once, they had a system to try to reward employees for helping each other. Essentially, everyone got a certain number of points they earned each month that could be applied to purchases from a rewards program. It was a really good rewards program, and people really used those reward points. In addition to the ones you got for yourself, you got some points you could give to someone for helping you out at work. It was a major incentive to help other people. Some employees who were especially helpful covered their entire Christmas shopping using those reward points.

(U) *The notion of "peer performance review" has apparently taken off in some circles.* According to a 31 July 2012 article in the Wall Street Journal (see it [here](#)), some firms are using peer performance reviews as a way to flatten management and encourage teamwork. Bloggers commenting on this article pronounced that "The manager-driven, once-a-year performance review may soon become a thing of the past. Good riddance."

(U) Admittedly, there are some problems with peer performance review. One big issue is the same one that plagues internet news sites that allow comments: junk feedback. While it is probably dangerous to completely base rewards on employee feedback, I have to believe that what peers think about an employee has to mean something. If a branch manager thinks that an employee deserves 10% of his branch's available rewards, but the branch rank and file feel this person deserves none, that shows at the very least that there is a problem somewhere.

(U) I don't think I've spent a day in my career as a post-9/11 hire where I haven't heard about the importance of collaboration. If it really is that important, it seems like it ought to be have some metrics other than those dreamt up in my own self-conflicting -- and self-conflicted -- bullets.

(U) Notes:

* (U) My son will never go to MIT. In order to multiply by sevens, he has to physically walk across the room to imagine himself scoring a touchdown for each factor of seven.

(U//FOUO) Have thoughts on this topic? Post them on the [related Tapioca Pebble](#).

(U) *Standard disclaimer: The opinions expressed by the SIGINT Philosopher are his own and do not necessarily*

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(U) The SIGINT Philosopher: Lessons for Civil Servants from the American Civil War (That Don't Concern Killing Vampires)

FROM: (U//FOUO) [REDACTED]

Run Date: 10/22/2012

(U) I am an enthusiast of the American Civil War. I'm not proud of this, as I long held that the Civil War was the lone preserve of aging, bearded, paunchy men named [REDACTED] who would make up for their lack of charisma by memorizing the entire order of battle for Longstreet's wing at Chancellorsville* or reenacting Chickamauga on the weekends with paintball guns. But eventually, it got to me. It's hard to resist the compelling nature of the crucible of our nation's history, especially when I live within two hours of a dozen of the most important battles. I may have even been seen celebrating the 150th anniversary of Antietam in September at Sharpsburg. (Not as a re-enactor, although I do have an excellent beard.)

(U) As I've begun to read a little deeper into the war, I can't help but think that if I had been an adviser to Lincoln at the outset of war in 1861, I'd have probably told him that trying to win such a war was insane. I think I'd have advised him

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to win such a war was insane. I think I'd have advised him that it was folly to try and fight a war to make a nation as large as the South agree to rejoin the Union. Questions I'd have raised might have included: "How will you raise an Army? Who will lead it when so many of the best officers are from the South? How will you raise taxes to support it when you have a population that hates taxes? What if Europe intercedes? And what if, by some miracle, we can win this war -- how will we govern a people who do not want to be governed, and who may continue a low-level resistance forever?"

(U) My reasoning would have been based on a pragmatic philosophy that I've spent a lot of time developing, and which I can elucidate eloquently. (Not as eloquently, though, as Jack Sparrow elucidates the same philosophy when he hits Will Turner upside the head and tells him "the only thing in this world that matters is what I can do and what I can't do.") For all my well-reasoned dissent, though, the advice I'd have given Lincoln would have been wrong.

(U) We are all experts -- or at least very well-informed --about the issues we work. And there is a good chance that as an expert, you may find that you disagree with our national policy on the issue you work. If you are an expert in information security, maybe you think our cyber security posture is weak. If you are an expert in Zendian foreign policy, maybe you think we are taking too hawkish or too soft a stance on the Zendian arms embargo. We probably all have something we know a lot about that is being handled at a higher level in a manner we're not entirely happy about. This can cause great cognitive dissonance for us, because we may feel our work is being used to help the government follow a policy we feel is bad.

(U) Such cognitive dissonance isn't new. U.S. Grant, the great hero of the Civil War, first earned his bona fides in the Mexican-American war. He wasn't entirely thrilled about his role in that war, though. He once called the conflict "the most unjust war a powerful nation ever inflicted upon a weaker one." So how do we reconcile ourselves to being cogs in a machine we think is damaging our own best interests?

(U) Many people may answer this with two versions of "it's not my responsibility." You can take the less noble of the two versions of this and simply say "It's above my pay grade, and as long as I'm getting paid, it's on someone else if they mess up." A higher form of this sentiment might say "I may not

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up." A higher form of this sentiment might say "I may not like what decision makers are doing, but my oath is to uphold the constitution, and as long as those decision makers are operating constitutionally, I will put my own feelings aside, and support them."

(U) The Civil War has helped me to see two other ways I might reconcile my misgivings. First, I realize that *as hard as it is to believe, I might actually be wrong*. I'd have been wrong about the Civil War, although I'd have had brilliant reasons for being wrong. It is possible that, as much as I know about the subject I am an expert in, I still might have managed to just be wrong.

(U) Secondly, I realize that sometimes, *you can be wrong and still get away with it if you commit to the wrong thing with enough determination*. Legendary baseball pitcher Greg Maddux was once asked about how he became such a brilliant, foxy pitcher, always throwing the pitch that fooled batters. He said he wasn't really a genius, but that if you throw the pitch you mean to throw in the right location at the right speed, it doesn't usually even matter if it's the "right" pitch. You'll still usually get a good result, and end up looking like a genius.

(U) No Civil War figure demonstrated this successful commitment to the wrong idea more than Confederate General Robert E. Lee. His campaigns are a study of foolhardiness that worked for the better part of two years. Time and again, he would buck all military wisdom, attack against greater forces, attack with his flank exposed, attack when Venus was aligned with Pluto, attack, attack, attack. It worked for so long in part because even though his plans may not have always been very wise, he and everyone in his command *believed* they would work, and committed to making them work.

(U) So I try to be a good lieutenant and good civil servant of even the policies I think are misguided. Perhaps I will be wrong. Or perhaps, if I support a poor policy well enough, I can make that policy look like it was a good one all along. At the very least, I can always take solace that I have a really cool beard.

(U) Notes:

* (U) Yes, █ I realize that Longstreet was not at Chancellorsville.

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