

## No more Mr Scrupulous Guy

John Sutherland

18 February 2002

*The Guardian*

How one of the two brains behind the Iran-Contra scandal this week became one of America's most powerful men

Last Wednesday something strange happened. The American population was instructed to panic. Place themselves, that is, on a state of highest vigilance. Some cataclysmic act of terrorism would happen -- within hours. But nothing terrible happened. Something creepy did. On Thursday there was an inconspicuous news item. John M Poindexter had been appointed to head a new agency "to counter attacks on the US", such as Wednesday's no-show. It is equivalent, in British terms, to Jeffrey Archer being made chancellor of the exchequer.

The agency which Poindexter will run is called the Information Awareness Office. You want to know what that is? Think, Big Brother is Watching You. IAO will supply federal officials with "instant" analysis on what is being written on email and said on phones all over the US. Domestic espionage. You want to test it out? Text-message any American friend, "Bmb OK. Allah gr8".



The IAO is one of two new offshoots of the Pentagon-based Darpa -- the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (it's venerable ancestor, Arpa, invented the internet). The other new agency is called the Information Exploitation Office. Its mission is to supply similarly instant analysis about overseas enemy targets. IEO will employ the computerised sensor networks that have proved so successful in Afghanistan. And, from now on, America -- with IEO guiding its smart weaponry -- will launch sneak attacks. No more Mr Nice Guy.

IAO and IEO will get a big chunk of the \$48bn of the taxpayers' money George Bush is pumping into his war on the evildoers. Never again will it be said that US intelligence agencies went to sleep on the job -- or that they were too careful about the American citizen's civil rights to do that job. No more Mr Scrupulous Guy.

Poindexter is frighteningly smart and very unscrupulous. He graduated top of his class at the Naval Academy in 1958 and went on to a PhD in physics at the California Institute of Technology. He returned to uniform as America's best-educated sailor. He wasn't a desk warrior. Poindexter commanded missile destroyers. He won medals to hang alongside his academic diplomas. He is the model for Tom Clancy's hero, Jack Ryan.

After the assassination attempt on President Reagan in 1981, Poindexter was called in to review White House security. Reagan was impressed and appointed him a national security adviser, in 1983, with the rank of vice-admiral.

At this point, things started to go wrong. He and Oliver North were found to be up to their necks in the Iran-Contra (guns for hostages) scam, which blew up in 1986. Poindexter was charged and found guilty of conspiracy, obstruction of justice, and the destruction of evidence in 1990; this was overturned on appeal the following year. The case against them was that they meticulously wiped out 5,000 incriminating emails -- but forgot about the back-up tapes. Even smart guys goof sometimes.

Poindexter was also accused by a Costa Rican government commission of being involved in cocaine trafficking to raise funds for the contras, though this was never proved (you can find details in "Cocaine shipped by contra network", *The Guardian*, July 22 1989).

His excuse for his behaviour was brazen: "I made a very deliberate decision not to tell the president so that I could insulate him from the decision and provide some future deniability for the president if it ever leaked out." In other words, he gave himself the right to run America's foreign policy behind the back of the commander in chief. Who the hell voted for John M Poindexter?

Both North and Poindexter have gone on to do well. North has a radio chat programme that rivals Rush Limbaugh in rightwing virulence. Poindexter was recruited by Syntek Technologies, a firm in bed with Darpa. His hand was back in the hi-tech cookie jar. As a company vice-president, Poindexter helped develop Genoa -- an "intelligence mining, information harvesting" system designed to explore (clandestinely) large computer databases. Listen in on America's electronic conversations, that is.

Poindexter is, once again, one of the most powerful men in America. His job description is "crisis manager". How do you put a man with Poindexter's record back in the manager's box? Well, a spurious crisis would be convenient. Now do you understand what was going on last Wednesday -- or must I spell it out for you?

Copyright © 2002 Guardian Newspapers Limited  
Reprinted for Fair Use Only.