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Abstract

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Edmonds grew up in Iran and Turkey. Her father, a physician, was outspoken in support of justice and paid the penalty, being arrested and tortured under the regime of the Shah of Iran. Edmonds came to the US, thrilled to finally live in a country where freedom meant something - or so she thought.

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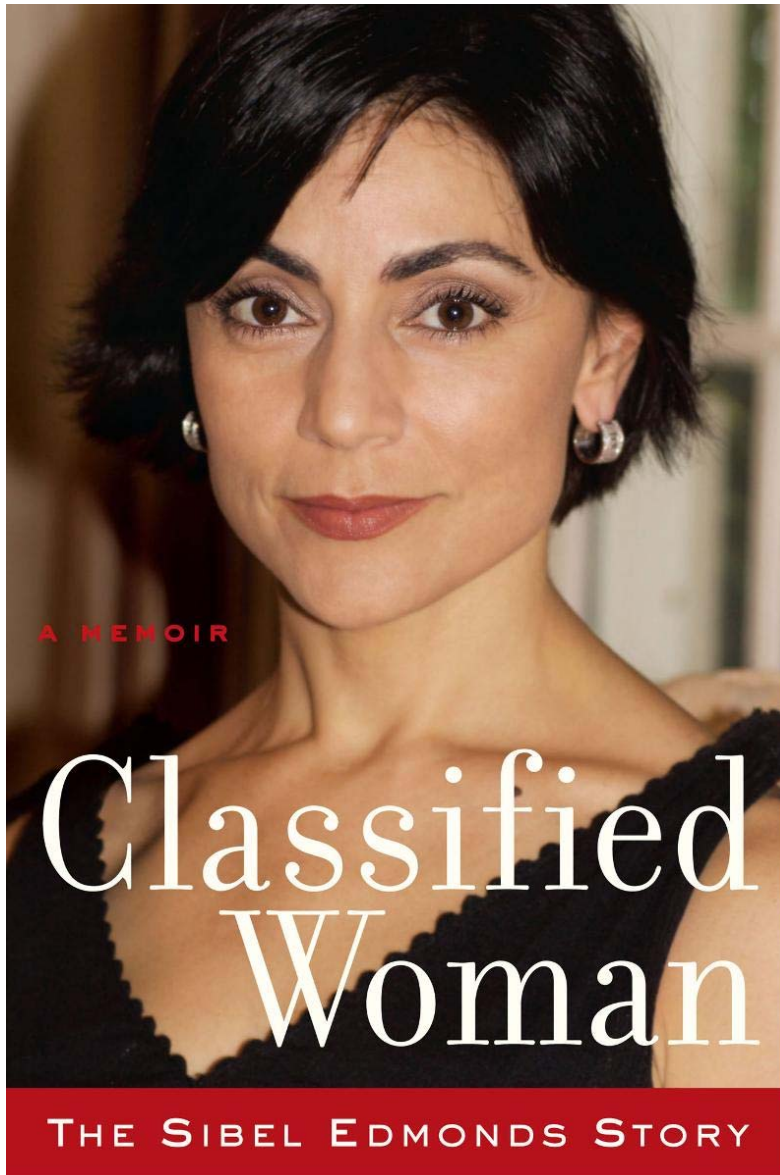
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Classified woman

by Sibel Edmonds

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Reviewer: Brian Martin



Sibel Edmonds worked for the FBI. She discovered corruption and reported it - and suffered reprisals. She kept fighting, taking the issue to the highest reaches of the US political and judicial system. The book *Classified Woman* is her story.

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Edmonds grew up in Iran and Turkey. Her father, a physician, was outspoken in support of justice and paid the penalty, being arrested and tortured under the regime of the Shah of Iran. Edmonds came to the US, thrilled to finally live in a country where freedom meant something - or so she thought.

While studying at university, she applied for work at the FBI. After years of delay, suddenly she was urgently called to a job. The reason was the attacks of 9 September 2001. Translators were in high demand. The FBI had a huge backlog of intercepts and recorded conversations that needed translation and analysis. Edmonds soon showed her exceptional skills and was called for numerous assignments.

However, not everyone in the FBI welcomed her contributions. She discovered tantalising information about organising of the 9/11 attacks, and indications of a possible future attack. However, her boss did not want to know. Why not? Because if the FBI were shown to have missed some crucial intelligence prior to 9/11, it would make them look bad. So these cases were closed down.

But it was worse than this. Edmonds discovered that another translator in her area, Melek Can Dickerson, had negligible capacity to understand Turkish, yet was making crucial decisions about which files to ignore. This was despite well-publicised corruption in Turkey involving drug-running, money laundering and the nuclear black market. Those involved had high-level connections in the US, and were paying them for protection. Dickerson was tied into these corrupt networks and apparently was using her position in the FBI to prevent investigations of key figures involved in criminal activities.

Some of Edmonds' work was sabotaged. On occasions, she came to the office to continue a crucial translation and discovered that lots of it had been lost or garbled, losing days of effort. She tried to find out how that had happened. All trails led to her own supervisor.

Then there were security breaches. You might imagine

that, with all the secrecy involved, that the FBI followed protocols closely. Quite the contrary. Files were not locked away like they were supposed to be, so they could just be put in a bag and taken away. Computers were unsecured, so they could easily be accessed or stolen. Many security rules were never enforced.

So what should Edmonds have done? She assumed that someone higher up in the FBI needed to know and would address the problem. This is where she went wrong, as do so many whistleblowers. She trusted the system and paid the penalty.

She was warned repeatedly by others in the bureau who sympathised with her concerns but knew from their own experience that it was impossible to change the culture of the organisation. She learned from them of more serious cover-ups. Top US government figures, such as Condoleezza Rice, were saying there had been no information about the impending 9/11 attacks, but this was wrong. High-level figures in the FBI, the CIA and the Defense Department were doing everything possible to avoid responsibility, and this meant covering up the truth. One of her superiors informed her in these words:

You need to know a little about some policies that are followed religiously in the FBI. Policy one: one for all, all for one. Policy two: problems and embarrassments are always swept under the rug - *always*. They don't want to know about serious and embarrassing problems, no matter how scandalous. They don't want people reporting these types of issues and cases; especially on the record, in writing. (p. 104)

"They" in this quote referred to "the management, the headquarters, the director." The implication of this advice was that protecting the reputation of FBI management was more important than protecting the US from terrorists and criminals.

Her co-workers and bosses advised her to either stay and accept what was happening, or to leave - but Edmonds wouldn't accept this advice. She felt it was her duty as a loyal employee and citizen to report the security risks she discovered - including external risks to the US and internal risks within the FBI - to higher authorities. Thus she began a journey travelled by many whistleblowers before her, one that can be labelled "the failure of official channels."

Within the FBI, she got nowhere. Reporting problems to

ever higher officials simply made her a marked woman. Before long, reprisals began. She found that her phone was tapped. When meeting key figures outside bureau offices, for example in a restaurant, two agency figures would sit nearby and conspicuously listen to and video her, a transparent attempt at intimidation, to deter anyone else from joining Edmonds.

The worst part was threats to her family members living in Turkey. Her co-worker Dickerson, whose work Edmonds had exposed as protecting criminals in Turkey, threatened Edmonds and apparently used connections to have them threatened.

FBI management instructed Edmonds to take a lie detector test, with the usual bind. If she went, the results could be fiddled and used to dismiss her; if she refused to go, she could be dismissed for disobeying instructions. Only with the support of astute advice was she able to take the test and ensure that the results were not manipulated. However, she was fired anyway.

One big disappointment was the response of US watchdog bodies.

The day after I was fired, I began looking for an attorney, which proved difficult. Good, affordable attorneys willing to take on the FBI and Justice Department are a rarity in Washington, DC. As far as government watchdog and whistleblower organizations go, none of them call back unless you happen to be famous. (It took me years to understand the game: high-profile cases are cash cows for many of these groups, who use the funds they raise to pay the salaries of their staffs, none of whom are whistleblowers.) (p. 152)

Eventually, she decided to go public, and suddenly things looked more promising. She was persuaded to appear on national television, after which she was contacted by numerous other media, in the typical flurry of attention. A key spin-off was being contacted by numerous other whistleblowers from intelligence agencies.

The FBI began a media counter-offensive, leaking information to discredit Edmonds. Her reputation was especially damaged in Turkey, where she was denounced as a spy. Edmonds had been visiting her extended family in Turkey every year, but now she knew she could never again visit the country, because she

would probably be arrested, imprisoned, tortured and killed. Just in time, Edmonds was able to convince her sister to leave Turkey for the US.

As Edmonds became well known, she was contacted by one of the watchdog bodies that had previously done nothing: the American Civil Liberties Union. Edmonds at first was so disgusted that she refused the ACLU's overtures to assist her, but eventually she accepted the ACLU's support for a legal challenge to the FBI over her dismissal. This is where the story becomes amazing.

So determined was the government to prevent Edmonds from succeeding in court that it invoked a little-used law, state secrets privilege, to prevent the case from proceeding. With the ACLU's support, the case was taken through several courts. The government pulled out its strongest techniques. The case was originally assigned to what seemed to be a fair judge. Through behind-the-scenes pressure, it was reassigned to a judge who was a pawn of the Bush administration, and who would rule for the government no matter what the evidence. Appeals went up to the Supreme Court, unsuccessfully.

The extraordinary part of this saga is that the government was able to retrospectively claim that certain information was classified, even though it was already in the public domain. This information included Edmonds' date of birth, where she attended university and what languages she speaks. This absurd prohibition was a side-effect of the contortions required by the administration and courts as they tried to prevent the release of embarrassing information. Retrospectively classifying information as secret prevented action by the US Congress. This result had nothing to do with national security; quite the contrary, it damaged security but protected incompetence, negligence and criminality within the national security apparatus.

Edmonds felt she had to pursue the matter to the highest level - the Supreme Court, with the support of the ACLU - because otherwise the government would invoke state security privilege in other cases. She was right: this is exactly what the government subsequently did. Laws designed for exceptional circumstances are now used in routine circumstances to prevent releasing information to the public because it is embarrassing to the government.

After 9/11, the US Congress set up a commission to

investigate the events, supposedly in depth, accepting submissions from anyone. But when Edmonds contacted the commission and told them the sort of information she had, they didn't want to know. She discovered others with important information were similarly given the cold shoulder. Then she heard about four women from New Jersey whose husbands had died in the 9/11 attacks. Edmonds made contact and found they were allies in the struggle to raise the alarm about problems in the security system.

You might ask, why wouldn't a commission dedicated to discovering the truth about 9/11 want to know about missed warnings of an attack on the US and the penetration of the FBI by figures linked to organised crime in the Middle East? The reason seems to be that too many members of Congress have links to the apparently respected government and business people in Turkey and elsewhere who would be exposed through a thorough investigation. So the commission didn't attempt to assign responsibility for the 9/11 attacks. Its report received saturation media coverage. According to Edmonds and the New Jersey activist widows, it was a whitewash.

One of her earliest and most helpful allies was Daniel Ellsberg, who had leaked the Pentagon Papers, a history of US government involvement in the Vietnam war, back in the 1970s. Edmonds, having been contacted by numerous other whistleblowers, decided to set up an organisation, the National Security Whistleblowers Coalition. This was an outstanding initiative, given the power of the national-security agencies in the aftermath of 9/11. Many former employees were willing to become involved in the coalition because the agencies had become more interested in money and power than in doing their jobs properly.

Edmonds continued to believe in official channels. If the courts had become tools of the system, she next put her hope in the political system, and organised lobbying of politicians. Some were supportive. Then came the 2008 election, when Barack Obama was elected. To Edmonds' disgust, the previously supportive politicians didn't follow through, and the Obama administration carried on the same oppressive policies as its predecessor, the Bush administration. Obama had voiced support for whistleblowers, but his administration took tougher action against them than Bush's. So much for putting trust in political reform.

For years, Edmonds poured incredible energy into her campaigns, holding herself together by the hope of real change. Her husband was a pillar of strength through every crisis. Eventually the disillusionments became too great, and she broke down, unable to do anything. It took a long time for her to recover and to forge a new path: running a blog and website, and writing her book *Classified Woman*.

For some readers, the story Edmonds tells may be almost too confronting to believe. However, I found it entirely convincing because all of Edmonds' experiences follow a trajectory familiar to whistleblowers: speaking out, reprisals, appeal to official channels, the failure of official channels, and going public. Not every whistleblower proceeds this way, but enough of them do for the path to be well worn. Edmonds' story is unusual mainly in the exceptionally high profile of her saga and the lengths the US government went to block independent investigation of her claims.

There is another stage worth mentioning: going to the media. In many whistleblower cases, the mass media are powerful allies. A balanced treatment of a whistleblower story is often highly damaging to the employer, so media coverage is often the best support a whistleblower can obtain. But this applies only to cases within a certain political context. Some cases are too hot to handle even by the media. In the US, the mainstream media will not challenge the status quo beyond a certain point, as Edmonds discovered.

Early in her struggles, the media were keenly interested, but as the stakes became higher and the implications more far-reaching, suddenly the media lost interest. Concerning tough questions about espionage and invoking state secrets privilege, "The media - that is, the mainstream media in the United States - never asked these questions, never sought an answer through investigative work. Never." (p. 283) Meanwhile, alternative media and foreign mass media remained intensely interested.

What could Edmonds have done differently? This question is relevant to any potential whistleblower. The first thing was not to trust her bosses to do the right thing. In dealing with any issue in which senior management might be implicated and have something to hide, they essentially become the enemy of truth and fair play and hence the enemy of the whistleblower. They are not to be trusted. Even those who seem

sympathetic may not do the right thing, because their jobs are at stake. So who can be trusted? Co-workers are good prospects, especially those who have nothing to lose - maybe they are planning to leave anyway. Former workers are also possible allies, as are friends, family members and concerned members of the public.

An often-repeated piece of advice to potential whistleblowers is to collect lots of information about the problem. This immediately causes a difficulty for employees in national security agencies, because collecting information - for example, making copies of one's own work - can be treated as a breach of security. It doesn't matter that lots of others are doing things that are much worse: any violation of procedures can be used as a pretext for reprisals. Nevertheless, collecting information is so important that it can be worth taking the risk. The implication is it is best to lie low rather than signalling an intent to take a public stand. As soon as Edmonds discovered possible wrongdoing, she started reporting it to her boss and later to higher officials. She made herself a sitting target.

The higher the stakes, the more consideration should be given to anonymous leaking. Edmonds did not take this road, so how well it might have worked for her is uncertain. It is worth noting that speaking out means the attention is often more on the whistleblower and the injustice of reprisals than on the issue being addressed. Edmonds was adamant that national security was the central concern, but this often took a back seat in her saga of secrecy, surveillance, intimidation and other reprisals that she encountered. She was aware of this problem but could not find an easy way to overcome it.

Another lesson is not to trust official channels. Edmonds tried one after another, continually searching for justice. Eventually she learned that the system was sewn up: there was no way to achieve reform on the inside. Through a process of elimination, she found only two reliable ways of having an impact: mobilising other national security whistleblowers and alerting the wider public.

One of the common pieces of advice to whistleblowers is that publicity is a powerful ally, when it can be obtained. Mass media coverage can make a huge difference. Edmonds found this initially. But as the stakes became higher, even the US mass media pulled back, afraid to cover a story that showed high-level corruption and cover-ups.

Edmonds set up a blog and was having a big impact. She was not prepared for Google to succumb to pressure and delete the blog at a crucial time. The lesson here is to prepare for a wide range of possible attacks. Edmonds later set up a website that was less susceptible to pressure.

If Edmonds had known what was coming, she might have chosen an entirely different strategy, lying low, collecting information, leaking information, and anonymously notifying committed campaigners about ways to intervene against corruption in the security apparatus. Perhaps some future insider dissidents will take this path. Meanwhile, we can be thankful that there are individuals such as Edmonds who have taken the noble, principled path of speaking out, paying the penalty for pushing for honest and effective behaviour, and surviving to mobilise others and tell a story that can inform and inspire us all.

Sibel Edmonds, *Classified Woman: The Sibel Edmonds Story. A Memoir* (Alexandria, Virginia: Sibel Edmonds, 2012)

Book ordering information:
<http://www.classifiedwoman.com/>

Boiling Frog Post: <http://www.boilingfrogspost.com/>

National Security Whistleblowers Coalition:
<http://www.nswbc.org/>

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