

The Tale of Hushai the Archite

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The influence agent in Biblical times.

C. N. Geschwind

Since the publication of the *Studies* article, "Wanted: An Integrated Counterintelligence" in the summer of 1963, there has been an increase of community interest and concern about that most dangerous and least publicized of all agents, the "agent of influence."¹

Accordingly, it seems appropriate to review the story of the first influence agent operation on record. This operation was set up by King David and is recounted in II Samuel, 15-18. This account is a good deal more circumstantial and detailed than the frequently cited cases of Rahab the Safe House Keeper (Joshua 2: 1), and Delilah the Penetration Agent (Judges 16: 5). Furthermore, besides its historical and human interest, this operation reminds us of the efficacy of simplicity, audacity, speed, and the exploitation of human frailties in this kind of enterprise. Here is what happened, when King David played for time to counter his son Absalom's surprise attack.

The Situation

David's handsome and popular son, Absalom, having waited many years

in vain for his father to go the way of all kings, formed a conspiracy to kill him and usurp the throne. King David soon became aware that Absalom had assembled a large revolutionary force from among the men of Israel, and that the King's best privy counsellor, Ahithophel the Gilonite, had defected to Absalom. Upon hearing of this counsellor's defection, King David prayed that the "counsel of Ahithophel might be turned to foolishness" but he also gathered his loyal generals and bureaucrats and fled. Absalom thereupon occupied the royal palace.

Mounting the Operation

When David stopped to pray in the course of his flight, Hushai the Archite, an aged counsellor, came to him with his coat rent and earth upon his head, professing grief and loyalty which the King evidently knew to be sincere. King David said to Hushai, "If thou return to the city and say unto Absalom, I will be thy servant, oh King, as I have been thy father's servant hitherto'. ... then mayest thou for me defeat the counsel of Ahithophel ... and what thing soever thou shalt hear out of the Palace, thou shalt tell it to Zadok and Abiathar the priests, who have with them their two sons, and by them ye shall send unto me everything that ye can hear."

Capturing the Dupe

When Hushai the Archite had made his way to the palace, he approached Absalom, who knew him well, and said, "God save the King!"

Absalom asked, "Is this thy kindness to thy friend, David. Why wentest thou not with thy friend?"

Hushai replied, "Nay, but whom the Lord and this people and all the men of Israel choose, his will I be and with him will I abide ... as I have served in thy father's presence, so will I be in thy presence." And so Hushai the Archite was accepted as a defector and reestablished as a counsellor.

The Influence Operation

At the council of war which Absalom called, Ahithophel advised Absalom as follows: "Let me now choose out twelve thousand men, and I will arise and pursue after David this night and will come upon him while he is weary and weakhanded and will make him afraid. All the people that are with him shall flee, and I will smite the king only. I will bring back all the people unto thee." This proposal reportedly pleased Absalom and all the elders well, but they must have had some doubts and second thoughts as to where the glory would land, for Absalom said: "Call now Hushai the Archite also, and let us hear likewise what he saith."

Hushai lost no time in exploiting the distrust, jealousy, fear, and guilt complexes inherent in the situation, saying: "Thou knowest thy father and his men, that they be mighty men and they be chafed in their minds, as a bear robbed of her whelps in the field: and thy father is a man of war and will not lodge with the people. Behold, he is hid now in some pit or in some other place and it will come to pass when some of (our men) be overthrown at the first that whosoever heareth it will say, 'There is slaughter among the people that follow Absalom!' And even he that is valiant shall utterly melt, for all Israel knoweth that thy father is a mighty man. Therefore I counsel that all Israel be generally gathered unto thee from Dan even to Beersheba as the sand is by the sea for multitude and that thou go to battle in thine own person. So shall we come upon him in some place . . . as the dew falleth on the ground and of him and of all the men that are with him there shall not be left so much as one. Moreover, if he be gotten into a city, then shall all Israel bring ropes to that city and we will draw it into the river until there be not one small stone found there."

Now, Absalom and "all the men of Israel" thought this advice was better than the advice of Ahithophel, no doubt in part because it gave everybody a piece of the action, and when Ahithophel saw that his counsel was rejected, he went home, "put his household in order and hanged himself" rather than get into a stenching contest with a skunk. While this demonstrated Ahithophel's foresight, it also put Hushai the Archite fully in the driver's seat. A little effective counterintelligence work

on Ahithophel's part might have yielded bigger dividends.

The Espionage Action

Like Alger Hiss millennia later, Hushai the Archite was not content to stick to the relatively safe business of influence operations, but had also to dabble in espionage. Hushai immediately called on Zadok and Abiathar the priests and told them: "Thus and thus did Ahithophel counsel Absalom and the elders of Israel, and thus and thus I have counselled. Now therefore send quickly and tell David not to lodge in the wilderness but speedily pass over (the Jordan)." The sons of these priests, the couriers Jonathan and Ahimaaz, were staying under cover outside the royal city, and received this message via "a wench," not otherwise identified. An informer observed this contact and reported it to Absalom, who sent out an investigative force. The couriers were aware of the leak and sought help from a village woman who hid them in a well. When the investigators queried the woman she said, "They went that-away," or words to that effect, and the search went astray. The couriers then hastened to King David, who promptly crossed the Jordan and mobilized a desperate army.

The Pay-off

Eventually Absalom brought a large, but inexperienced force into battle against the tightly organized forces of the King in terrain in which the King's professionals had every advantage, producing twenty thousand corpses: "The wood devoured more people that day than the sword ... " Among the casualties in the woods was Absalom himself, who appears to have been something of a beatnik, for he had long golden tresses of which he was very proud, and by which he got caught in a tree. There General Joab found and killed him, ending the insurrection. Since Hushai's accomplices subsequently prospered, it is reasonable to assume that he also retained an honored place in the restored administration and ultimately retired with a large pension. General Joab, however, did not fare so well, for King David bore him a lethal grudge for

killing Prince Absalom. Perhaps the King saw his renegade counsellor Ahithophel as the real villain in the piece.

1 *Studies* VII 3, p. 19.

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