

IS THAT WHY WE BOMBED THE CHINESE EMBASSY?

As soon as I read the news that the new Chinese stealth fighter might have been reverse-engineered from an F-117 Nighthawk shot down during the NATO bombing of Serbia, I wondered the same thing implied (though not explicitly stated) in this Fox News piece: did we bomb the Chinese embassy because they were actively collecting parts and information on the plane?

Western diplomats have said China maintained an intelligence post in its Belgrade embassy during the Kosovo war. The building was mistakenly struck by U.S. bombers that May, killing three people inside.

“What that means is that the Serbs and Chinese would have been sharing their intelligence,” said Alexander Neill, head of the Asia security program at the Royal United Services Institute, a defense think tank in London. “It’s very likely that they shared the technology they recovered from the F-117, and it’s very plausible that elements of the F-117 got to China.”

The Nighthawk was shot down on March 27, 1999, and the embassy was “accidentally” bombed on May 7, 1999.

The US government explained away the bombing, partly, by saying the CIA had done the targeting (starting in March), which was not something they normally did at this level.

I think it is useful to note that this episode is unusual because the CIA does not normally assemble, on its own, target nomination packages containing the coordinates of specific

installations or buildings. The targeting support typically provided by CIA is usually at the strategic and planning level, such as analytical judgments on the kinds of targets that are the most important, commentary or specific information concerning targets selected by the military or others, and information that assists the military in identifying future targets.

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Second, within CIA there were no procedural guidelines for the officers involved in targeting to follow, and there was little senior management involvement in guiding the targeting process. Although our military support organization had been involved in targeting matters, they had not previously been involved in the approval of target nomination packages unilaterally proposed and wholly assembled at CIA. This occasion was precedent-setting.

Though that doesn't explain why the CIA would have been involved at all, particularly against Yugoslavia's Federal Directorate for Supply and Procurement, the purported target.

Now, obviously, I don't know the answer to this question. Though David Axe notes that the military retired the F-117 program long before it has retired similar programs and takes from that the military may have known the plane's technology had been compromised.

It's possible the U.S. defense establishment knew that China had cracked the F-117's secrets. Perhaps accepting that the cat was out of the bag, the Americans reportedly made no effort to retrieve the stealth artifacts from that Belgrade museum. "A lot of delegations visited us in the past,

including the Chinese, Russians and Americans ... but no one showed any interest in taking any part of the jet," Zoran Milicevic, deputy director of the museum, told the AP.

And in a move that surprised many observers, in 2008 the Air Force formally retired the entire F-117 fleet, then roughly 40 strong. (A few F-117s are secretly still flying, apparently for tests.) Officially, the F-117 was obsolete. "I mean it's a 30-year-old concept now," F-117 pilot Lt. Col. Chris Knehans said, ignoring the fact that almost all U.S. combat aircraft designs are at least that old. It could be that the F-117 had to go because every potential rival knew its secrets.

If Axe is right, it at least reflects some awareness of what China was up to, though that could have come much later. If the bombing had anything to do with the downed Nighthawk, was it successful in achieving its mission (that is, could China's exploitation of the technology have been even worse)? Or was it a diplomatic failure and a strategic one?