FTCN Replay: How AI and Everyday Citizens Are Reshaping American Espionage

The United States is entering a new era of intelligence operations driven by artificial intelligence and the democratization of espionage capabilities, according to Anthony Vinci, former Chief Technology Officer at the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.

Vinci, author of **"The Fourth Intelligence Revolution: The Future of Espionage and the Battle to Save America,"** joined **From the Crows' Nest** host Ken Miller for a recent episode to trace how American intelligence has transformed through four distinct periods – from World War II's creation of the OSS to today's AI-powered landscape where both threats and collection capabilities have spread beyond government agencies to ordinary citizens.

A New Kind of Competition

After serving as an intelligence officer with deployments in Iraq, Africa, and Asia, Vinci observed how adversaries adapted asymmetric strategies to compete with American power. China, in particular, has focused on economic and technological espionage in ways the US intelligence community hasn't adequately matched.

China reportedly employs "a hundred thousand science, open source science, and technology information collectors," Vinci noted, while American efforts in this area pale in comparison. The intelligence community remains heavily focused on traditional political and military issues rather than the economic and scientific competition where adversaries are most active.

Vinci illustrated China's approach with an analogy: If tasked with collecting beach sand, China "would have a thousand tourists go to that beach and do nothing but hang out all day," then return home where intelligence services "would wring out their towels with all the sand in it."

Everyone Is Now a Target — and a Sensor

The democratization of intelligence cuts both ways. Every person is now being targeted — through data breaches, information operations, and even apps like TikTok collecting information on children.

But this democratization also means regular citizens can conduct intelligence work themselves. Tools have democratized so "we can all get online and research things," with sites like Bellingcat enabling citizen journalism to investigate war crimes and disinformation campaigns.

Vinci advocates training Americans to think like intelligence officers, similar to how cybersecurity awareness became widespread. Schools should teach these skills, with information campaigns from nonprofits, because "we need people to be resilient" against threats the government can't fully stop — and shouldn't necessarily control.

The AI Revolution

Artificial intelligence represents the most fundamental shift in intelligence operations. Unlike traditional software that merely presents data, AI "does the analysis. It does the collection. It does the dissemination."

A recent report showed Chinese cyber hackers used AI to automate 80% to 90% of an espionage campaign. This scalability means AI can accomplish in seconds what would take human analysts all day.

Vinci predicts that within less than five years, "90+% of all intelligence will be touched by AI in its process," including

scenarios where AI systems spy on each other – autonomous drones collecting intelligence on other autonomous systems.

He was present at the creation of Project Maven, the Defense Department's pioneering AI initiative for automating video analysis. The program was groundbreaking because it aimed to not just develop technology but "field it" operationally within a year, proving AI could be rapidly deployed rather than languish in research.

A Path Forward

Vinci outlined three priorities for winning this intelligence revolution. First, the US must rebalance intelligence resources toward science, technology, and economic threats, including emerging dangers like genetic espionage where Chinese companies collect DNA information.

Second, intelligence agencies must embrace AI implementation despite imperfections. "Yes, it still has errors. It still makes hallucinations. There are problems, but you know what? So do people," Vinci argued, noting that people also make mistakes and can't keep pace with available data.

Third, intelligence must expand beyond government agencies to embrace what Vinci calls a "whole of society" approach – incorporating companies, nonprofits, and everyday citizens into the intelligence system.

The electromagnetic spectrum battlefield exemplifies these trends. Vinci suggested citizens with smartphones could serve as collectors and early warning systems, while AI should automate the vast majority of spectrum operations.

As adversaries continue asymmetric competition through cyber theft, disinformation, and mass data collection, Vinci's message is clear: America's intelligence advantage depends on rapid AI adoption, broader societal participation, and refocusing on the economic and technological battlegrounds

where the real competition is taking place.