

## Geointeresting Podcast Transcript

### Episode 19: Yudhijit Bhattacharjee

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Welcome to Geointeresting, presented by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. Recently, author and journalist Yudhijit Bhattacharjee visited NGA's Springfield, Virginia, campus and told the story of Brian Regan, a former signals intelligence officer who stole over 20,000 pieces of classified information. Yudhijit was able to sit down with us and answer some questions. But first, let's listen to a part of his talk at NGA.

**YUDHIJIT:** So, Brian Regan works at the National Reconnaissance Office, which, as you know, is the agency that manages all of the spy satellites that the U.S. has in space. He was assigned to the agency in 1995 after about 15 years in the Air Force. He was a signals analyst and had worked as a signals analyst during the first Gulf War. And by a virtue of having a top secret clearance, he also had access to Intelink, which is, as you know, the intelligence community's version of the intranet. So there is a reason why you haven't heard the story of Brian Regan; maybe some of you have, but his story remains largely untold. And the reason is he got arrested just two weeks before 9/11, and his story got completely overshadowed. So despite being the first spy since the Rosenbergs, who were executed in 1953; despite being the first spy since then to become a candidate for the death penalty, he remains largely an unknown figure. Well, we'll change that in just a minute.

Regan's story is anything but typical. He was able to allude and stump authorities long after he was caught due to his nearly unbreakable code. This is not just a story of code breaking and espionage, but also the human side of Regan. Stay tuned for Geointeresting.

**NGA:** So today, you visited NGA to speak to our workforce about your new book coming out. What sparked your interest in this topic?

**YUDHIJIT:** I was fascinated. I have also been fascinated about the insider threat. I've written a few espionage stories, real-life espionage stories, over the years. But when I heard about the Brian Regan case, it was already six years past the conviction of Brian Regan. And I thought his story was already well-known and it was only I that didn't know it. But it turns out because Brian Regan was arrested shortly before 9/11, and he was convicted shortly after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, that his story sort of remains largely unknown. So I found it fascinating that he had used all these codes to hide the secrets he had stolen. So there was an intrinsic mystery aspect to the story beyond just the spy hunt itself. But then what really got my attention was the fact that he had made all these spelling errors, and he seemed both so cunning and so inept at the same time. And that made him a fascinating character to study. And as a journalist, I love to study complex characters.

**NGA:** It was really during the first part of how you described how the FBI was able to make a preliminary list of who they thought was committing espionage against the U.S. Could you go into that?

**YUDHIJIT:** In the book I describe all the digital forensics that they did in order to kind of develop a list of suspects. What Brian Regan had done in these anonymous letters that he had sent to



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the various embassies — at the time it was only known that the senders of these letters was anonymous; at the time had sent it to the Libyan Consulate. And the letters included certain printouts of satellite images and a few top-secret reports that had been derived from Intelink. And so those were the clues that were initially the most important. But there was also kind of a parallel effort to psychologically profile the traitor behind the letters. And so there was a convergence in these two investigative avenues to ultimately settle on Brian Regan.

**NGA:** And so could you talk a little bit about what some of his reasons for committing this crime was?

**YUDHIJIT:** So his main reason was financial trouble. He was in dire straits because of his severe debt. He had something like \$130,000 in debt; most of it from credit cards. He was also very worried that he wasn't going to have a means of earning a living once he retired from the Air Force. And his retirement was coming up in the year 2000. He joined the Air Force in 1980. He had risen to the rank of master sergeant, and he was going to retire at that rank. And so he had tried to get an extension for himself. He could have received an extension if he had agreed to deploy overseas, but he didn't want to dislocate his family. And so his request was denied. And I think that is the point at which Brian Regan felt the perfect storm in his life and decided that he needed to do something. Well, he decided that he was going to commit espionage because he had access to all of these secrets. He thought it would be relatively easy to steal them and find a buyer among some of these countries that he planned to target. Now there was a deeper reason for Brian Regan to do what he did. Throughout his life, Brian Regan had suffered a lot of disrespect and humiliation because of his dyslexia and because of his odd personality. A lot of his coworkers [and] a lot of his friends in high school and middle school — they thought that Brian Regan was not very smart. They thought he was just this strange, odd person who wasn't very bright. And Brian Regan had a deep desire to show that that wasn't the case. And I think that played a role in making him go down the path of treason.

**NGA:** What would you ask him if you had 10 minutes alone with him? What is one question you would want his true answer from?

**YUDHIJIT:** I would want to know why he didn't find a friend to talk to because I feel like that is the one thing that could have saved him. And I think I know the answer to that. Right from childhood, Brian Regan saw the world as an adversary. He did not see the world as a kind place that might lend him a helping hand. He thought he had to fend for himself. When he was a kid, he came from a large family. He came from a family of eight brothers and sisters. And he used to kind of put a padlock on his closet to kind of hide all the pop tarts and things — things like snacks he had collected — and didn't want his brothers to rifle through his snacks. And so he just felt like he had to. He had developed this notion of self-reliance that he needed to do everything by himself; he needed to fix his own problems. But I think that is something a lot of servicemen and servicewomen will identify with. That is pretty standard, and we live in a culture where self-reliance is seen as a sign of strength, and you are not supposed to reach out for help. But Brian Regan had every reason to reach out for help. He should have been reaching out for help as soon as his credit cards started mounting. He should have gone to see a financial counselor. He should have talked to his supervisor. He should have talked to a couple of his co-workers and said, "Will I really get a job when I retire? What am I going to do?" Because I believe he made the decision to commit espionage at a time when he was extremely worried about whether he would get a job. At the end of August 2000, he was supposed to

retire. So that is the one question I would ask him, and then, of course, there would be many others.

**NGA:** So after studying him in the case for so long, what could have been one thing, one scenario, or one instance or moment that he could have gotten away with it? Or do you even think there is a moment that if he hadn't slipped up, that he could have gotten away with it? Or was it all foiled from the beginning?

**YUDHIJIT:** I think that Brian Regan might have gotten away with it if his letters had reached the hands of an astute intelligence officer in the Libyan service or in the Iraq service and if that handler had done some background investigation on Brian and determined how to handle them — struck up a good partnership, much to the misfortune of the U.S. I think that was possible. But I can see many ways in which Brian Regan would have made other errors because Brian Regan certainly had a tendency to make some key errors despite meticulous planning; like so smart, so smart, and then suddenly, he leaves the door open. That sort of stupidity was ingrained in him; I shouldn't call it stupidity, but that kind of tendency to blunder at key moments. So he was a pioneer in many respects because he was the first person to realize that all of this digital access to secrets could be exploited in this way. I mean, that is the same thing that Snowden and Manning did years later. Maybe not for the exact same purposes, but they did use their digital access too. And so he would have probably slipped up in some other ways, but maybe he would have slipped up way after the damage was done. And so it really is a testament to the dedication of Special Agent Steve Carr of the FBI and his fellow agents and also agents from inside the NRO, who worked hard for so many months to catch him, then unearth the secrets that he had buried.

**NGA:** How do you pick what interests you in your writing, or does it interest you and you just write about it?

**YUDHIJIT:** Well I'm just a curious person. And what I'm most curious about is human psychology, I think, because humans are monsters of deception. Human beings can be so noble and can be so cruel. I mean, it is just fascinating that all of these traits lie inside of us, some dormant, some active. But obviously, when I go out into the world to look for stories, I go looking for stories in areas that I know a few things about or in areas where I have some access to people who know about those areas. So I was a reporter at Science Magazine for many years until I left to write this book. While at Science, I was able to write stories about neuroscience, astronomy, science, and security and other topics connected to scientific research. And in the course of pursuing those stories, I would come across human stories that had a kernel of science or a kernel of technology. And then the human story would become the more dominant thing that I was after, but of course, those stories would not work if I did not also report on the science. So it is really the meld of humanity and scientific and technological enterprise. That is sort of the area that most interests me and seems to be the most fertile ground to tell.

**NGA:** Thank you for coming. Thank you — we really appreciate it. Geointeresting is produced by the NGA Office of Corporate Communications. Never miss an episode by subscribing on SoundCloud or iTunes. You can also like us on Facebook, follow us on Twitter and visit us at [www.nga.mil](http://www.nga.mil). Thanks for listening!

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