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The Spy Who Said She Loved Me

Are "honey traps" real?

By [Christopher Beam](#)



Wikileaks founder Julian Assange attending a press conference at the Geneva Press Club in Geneva on November 1, 2010.

Fabrice Coffrini/AFP/Getty Images

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange [turned himself in](#) to British police on Tuesday after Sweden put out a warrant for his arrest. Assange stands accused of "rape, sexual molestation and unlawful coercion" during encounters with two Swedish women. But some Assange defenders are suggesting that the 39-year-old Australian is the victim of government-sponsored seduction, [known as a "honey trap."](#) Are honey traps real, or are they found only in James Bond movies?

Oh, they're real. Honey traps, also called "honey pots," have been a favorite spying tactic as long as sex and espionage have existed—in other words, forever. Perhaps the earliest honey trap on record was the [betrayal of Samson by Delilah](#), who revealed Samson's weakness (his hair) to the Philistines in exchange for 1,100 pieces of silver, as described in the book of Judges. The practice continued into the 20th century and became a staple of Cold War spy craft. Governments around the world set up honey traps to this day, but it's an especially common practice in Russia and China. The Central Intelligence Agency doesn't comment on whether its agents use their sexuality to obtain information, but current and former intelligence officials say [it does happen occasionally](#).

The classic honey trap is seduction to extract secrets. Perhaps the best-known trap layer was the Dutch exotic dancer [Mata Hari](#), who was executed by firing squad in France in 1917 for allegedly passing secrets along to the Germans. Other times, spies set honey traps to draw their victims into their enemy's clutches. In 1978, undercover Sandinista operative Nora Astorga [lured](#) a Nicaraguan general into her bedroom, where assailants slit his throat. When Israeli technician Mordechai Vanunu went public with secrets about Israel's nuclear capabilities in 1986, he fled to London, only to be seduced by a woman who led him to Mossad agents in Rome. (A rabbi later determined that the Mossad's actions were, in fact, [kosher](#).)

Honey trapping often leads to blackmail—though some of the more famous examples didn't go according to plan. In one 1957 case, the Soviets recruited an attractive man to seduce legendary (and gay) American columnist Joseph Alsop. When KGB agents tried to blackmail Alsop with compromising photos, he went to the American authorities and told them everything. London *Daily Telegraph* correspondent Jeremy Wolfenden got similarly ensnared in the 1960s, when the KGB photographed him having sex with another man. Wolfenden told the British embassy, and they asked him to become a double agent. The stress drove him to drink. He died at age 31. When the KGB tried to blackmail Indonesian President Achmed Sukarno with videotapes of the president having sex with Russian women disguised as flight attendants, Sukarno wasn't upset. [He was pleased](#). He even asked for more copies of the video to show back in his country.

Women, too, have been honey-trap targets. During the Cold War, East German intelligence chief Markus Wolf sent Stasi "Romeo spies" into West Germany to seduce powerful women and extract their secrets.* In the early '80s, a [CIA agent stationed in Ghana](#) fell in love with a man who turned out to be a Ghanaian intelligence officer.

No one has perfected the honey trap quite like the Russians. One former KGB agent [has said](#) that the Soviet intelligence agency didn't ask Russian women to stand up for their country but "asked them to lay down." One of the biggest Cold War spy cases was that of [Clayton Lonetree](#), a Marine Corps security guard entrapped by a female Soviet officer, then blackmailed into sharing documents. In 1987, he became the first Marine convicted of espionage. Russian spy craft didn't disappear with the Soviet Union. Russian political satirist Viktor Shenderovich was recently [filmed](#) cheating on his wife with a young woman named Katya, who had also seduced a half dozen other Kremlin critics. A similar trap appeared to [catch](#) an American diplomat in Moscow in 2009, but the State Department said the [evidence was fabricated](#) as part of a smear campaign.* China, too, seems to employ honey traps regularly. When former Deputy Mayor of London Ian Clement was [seduced and drugged](#) in his Beijing hotel room in 2009 only to find his BlackBerry stolen the next day, he [admitted](#) that he "fell for the oldest trick in the book."

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Explainer thanks Joseph Finder, author of [Vanished](#); Col. Rose Mary Sheldon of the Virginia Military Institute; and Tim Weiner, author of [Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA](#).

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Correction, Dec. 10, 2010: *This article incorrectly stated that the East German intelligence operation took place during World War II. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)*

Correction, Dec. 14, 2010: *This article originally stated that an American diplomat was caught in a honey trap in 2009 without mentioning that the*

State Department had rejected the evidence as fabricated. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)

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