

# Mum's plea for British NASA hacker

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London

IF you believe the Pentagon and NASA, Janis Sharp is the mother of an evil genius: her son Gary McKinnon is accused of the biggest hacking operation in US military history.

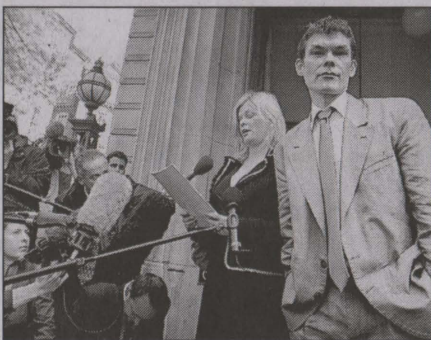
The \$US1 billion (\$1.45 billion) wrecking spree through cyberspace — he says it was a quest to uncover evidence of alien life — has left his family in its own twilight zone.

Next week, Mr McKinnon, 42, will have one last, desperate throw of the dice in the British courts to halt his extradition to the US, where he faces up to 70 years in a high-security prison.

His mother is also running out of time to convince authorities that the hack was the result of her son's Asperger syndrome.

"It doesn't excuse it, because if you commit a crime, you commit a crime," she said, in her first major interview.

"I would say to (British Prime Minister) Gordon Brown and (Opposition Leader) David Cameron, you both have vulnerable



**Facing extradition:** Gary McKinnon

young sons. Should we really be extraditing our vulnerable adults and letting them serve 70 years abroad? Seventy years for looking for UFOs?"

Ms Sharp argues that Asperger syndrome — a form of autism that causes obsessive or repetitive behaviour and impairs social skills — renders her son dangerously unready for life in a US penitentiary. Mr McKinnon has never left Britain.

"He won't survive. He's absolutely petrified. We've already received taunting messages about male rape, stun guns," she said.

"We worry that we won't be alive to see him free."

Mr McKinnon admits tapping into the networks, but denies malicious intent.

He was caught in 2002 after trying to download NASA photographs that he believed had been airbrushed to conceal evidence of alien life.

Mr McKinnon admits he was a regular cannabis user at the time.

However, US prosecutors argue that the hacking should not simply be excused as the harmless actions of a conspiracy theorist lost in cyberspace.

His virtual fingerprints were found across the entire matrix of US military might. That they were left there by a stoned loner in his dressing gown in a bedroom is not the point, say US prosecutors.

Ms Sharp responds: "He's not a genius. He good, but he's not the best. They had no passwords, no firewalls, and that's the

problem. Gary embarrassed them. They wanted to make an example of somebody for computer crime, so they thought Gary was a soft touch."

Mr McKinnon was an introverted and sensitive child, who, although not exceptionally academic, taught himself to play piano by the age of 7. "We came in to find him playing the *Moonlight* sonata," said Ms Sharp, 60.

A fear of travelling developed at an early age. "As a toddler, he would scream every time he had to go on a bus," she said.

Ms Sharp is angered by the terms of the extradition treaty between Britain and the US. US prosecutors do not need to show evidence to secure an extradition. Britain, however, cannot force the US to hand over its citizens.

Mr McKinnon moved one step closer yesterday to realising his hope to be tried in Britain, after offering to plead guilty to an offence under the Computer Misuse Act. His family is appealing to the Director of Public Prosecutions to accept the plea and allow him to face British proceedings.

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John Palazzi  
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