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Attaché Case

*A night in the Ukraine, a fast
goodbye to Moscow*

When Assistant Army Attaché James Holbrook, 41, left Moscow one day last January for a routine reconnaissance trip deep into the western Ukraine, he had no intention of partying along the way—particularly not at a bacchanal funded (and photographed) by the Soviet secret police. But just hours after arriving in the small city of Rovno (pop. 167,000), sources say, Holbrook's traveling companion—a fellow U.S. Army attaché—was drugged, and Holbrook himself obliged to fend off an incipient blackmail scheme. The uncompromised pair returned to

Moscow immediately. In keeping with U.S. procedure in such matters, Holbrook was whisked back to the U.S., his 21-month-old assignment to the Soviet Union at an abrupt and curious end.

Most of the details of Holbrook's Ukrainian misadventure—and exactly how far the entrapment attempt progressed before Holbrook grew suspicious and fled the party scene—remain top secret. (The Soviets claim he was caught with a woman in his Rovno hotel room.) Nor is there any firm consensus about Soviet motives in attempting to compromise Holbrook, or pretending to attempt to compromise him. The leading theory among U.S. officials is that the Soviets considered Holbrook an especially acute pest: he speaks perfect Russian and had made many friends among the Soviet military. The Soviets regard the dozen or so U.S. military attachés in Moscow as little

more than spies anyway. Indeed, Holbrook and his unfortunate fellow tripper—Lieut. Colonel Thomas Spencer, still among the American officers who work out of the Moscow embassy—were headed toward a particularly sensitive area: Lvov, a Soviet military headquarters city only 40 miles from the Polish border.

Intriguingly enough, just weeks before the Rovno incident, Holbrook was one of four Army officers recommended for a job as Vice President George Bush's aide-de-camp. Was Holbrook the target of a long-shot plot to slip a Soviet "mole" into the White House? An attractive speculation, but doubtful. Says a State Department expert: "The KGB can be much slyer than this when it is really recruiting a spy."

Holbrook, now reassigned to the Defense Intelligence Agency in Washington, calls the affair "an obvious no-comment situation." But if the Soviets merely wanted to neutralize an effective military attaché, then their attempt, however clumsy, was a complete success. ■