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Electronics: A Major Part Of Spy Game

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 19 — The intercepted radio conversations that purportedly took place between the hijackers of the Achille Lauro and an associate on shore have underscored the central role that electronic snooping now plays in the intelligence operations of the United States and other nations.

According to various intelligence officials and outside experts, both the United States and the Soviet Union make enormous expenditures each year to eavesdrop on the communications of nations all over the world and to protect their own sensitive communications from detection.

The United States' largest single intelligence organization, the National Security Agency, for example, has the prime responsibility for secretly recording and decoding electronic messages worldwide. Estimates of its budget are from \$5 billion to \$10 billion.

The second largest such organization, the National Reconnaissance Office, is in charge of operating the nation's spy satellites. It reportedly has a \$2.5 billion annual budget.

\$2 Billion for C.I.A.

The Central Intelligence Agency, by contrast, has a budget estimated at \$2 billion. The C.I.A. has the responsibility for overall analysis of the intelligence information and for guiding individual spies and undercover agents and directing undercover operations.

Thus, the two agencies primarily responsible for collecting various kinds of electronic data, or what the trade calls "Sigint" — short for "signals intelligence" — are apparently spending at least three times more than what the C.I.A. spends for intelligence from individual spies or "Humint" — short for "human intelligence."

James Bamford, author of a book on the National Security Agency, said Congressional experts estimated that 85 percent of the intelligence collected by the United States came from technical sources like satellites.

The strategic electronic espionage activities of the National Security Agency and the National Reconnaissance Office are conducted from several satellites and from hundreds of land- and ship-based eavesdropping stations in this country as well as in foreign countries.

Military Eavesdrops, Too

In addition, the three military services undertake various forms of tactical electronic espionage activities. For example, specially equipped Navy aircraft were able to eavesdrop and jam the messages from an Egyptian airliner as it flew across the Mediterranean with four Arab terrorists, and Israeli intelligence intercepted the ship-to-shore conversations from the cruise ship Achille Lauro.

The immediate significance of the interception of the conversation from the Italian liner is that it has given Federal prosecutors evidence of the involvement of Mohammed Abbas, leader of a Palestinian faction, in the hijacking.

According to intelligence officials, the United States and the Soviet Union are not alone in undertaking extensive electronic surveillance activities. Britain and Czechoslovakia are said to have widespread experience in this area of espionage.

One indication of the extent of the electronic surveillance threat inside the United States posed by the Soviet Union and other nations was President Reagan's decision to order the National Security Agency to lead a Government-wide effort to improve the communication security of the military, civilian agencies like the Internal Revenue Service and even private organizations, like banks, transmitting information that might be helpful to an enemy.

New Telephones

An aspect of this broad effort was an agency project announced a year ago to equip various Government agencies, military contractors and other private companies with as many as 500,000 newly developed telephones that make secret interception far more difficult than when a conversation is transmitted on convention instruments.

The deputy director of the National Security Agency in charge of communication security, Walter G. Deeley, said in an interview that he believed the United States was in "deep trouble" because so many key conversations were being picked up by hostile governments.

"They are having us for breakfast," he said. "We are hemorrhaging. Your progeny may not enjoy the rights we do today if we don't do something."

Mr. Deeley said anyone making a long-distance telephone call from the West Coast, Boston or Washington had no idea if the call would be transmitted by one of the nation's 19 domestic satellites, microwave towers or cable. "If it is going via satellite, you can presume the other guy is listening to it," he said.

Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Democrat of New York, a former member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, has also repeatedly accused the Soviet Union of widespread electronic surveillance here. He has unsuccessfully pressed for a law to make such activities a Federal crime.

The United States' eavesdropping satellites are known as "ferrets," and pick up radar, long-distance telephone calls, and the telemetry from missile tests. More than 25 years ago, the United States developed a technique to eavesdrop on the radio telephones in the limousines of top Soviet officials. It was not until early 1984, however, that the United States got around to adding protective equipment to the radio telephones of President Reagan and other top officials.