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Spying to close the gap

The story of the expulsions of 55 Soviet "diplomats" — in reality, technical spies — is a story of trying to control the high larceny of high technology.

The weepers and moaners on the media panels — including the Soviet "journalists" — stress the "tit for tat" aspect as an escalation game. They worry about imperiling the post-Reykjavik "climate" for arms talks.

This is to miss the point of Soviet and American purposes. Ronald Reagan wants a good climate for talks but sees no reason for buying it by playing down the espionage issue, which stands on its own.

Soviet Secretary General Mikhail Gorbachev has to think of "link-

ages," because he is in a weaker bargaining position on technology. So he speaks softly because he doesn't carry a big technology stick.

In his latest speech, he chides President Reagan for the unnamed "circles" in Washington who are hostile to a Soviet agreement. But in fact he needs the arms talks to get an agreement, and he needs his spies in order to reach a position of greater strength.

He is hurt badly by the lopping of his United Nations, Washington, and San Francisco spy staffs. So he "retaliates" in token fashion by sending five more American diplomats home and pulling out the entire Russian substaff of workers at the Moscow Embassy (who have also been spying).

The key term in the political vocabulary of the fearing liberals has become "sensitive." We must be "sensitive" and "sensitized" to the feelings of the Soviets, lest we disturb them and hurt the chances of "peace."

The counterculture of the '60s in America had much that has lasted, but its psychological "touchy-feely" phase is a poor substitute for a tough-minded politics of the Great Powers.

Americans should feel relieved that finally, after an intolerable delay, their government has awakened from its slumberous inaction about Soviet technology-stealers masquerading as "diplomats."

The new American criterion is almost sweetly reasonable, and even "symmetrical." Let there be equality of numbers. Let the Soviet and American embassies — and prime consulates — be limited to a staff of 251. This still gives the Soviets their huge U.N. delegation (now somewhat cut) as their extra technological guerrilla warriors.

Soviet diplomacy today is dominated by the technological imperative. It is fair to sum up Mr. Gorbachev's current policy as "negotiate and spy, spy and negotiate."

He is driven to both by the sad backwardness of Soviet technology. He has to keep spying in order to narrow the gap between American and Soviet science and technology. But he also has to keep negotiating for the same reason — to restrict the Strategic Defense Initiative to laboratory research and keep it from moving ahead while he jogs the Soviet economy out of its almost cataclysmic inertia.

If you dig deep enough, archeology-wise, to turn up layer after layer, you reach the vast current distance between the two cultures.

The Soviets, who once boasted of being revolutionaries, are mired in a curious conservatism. Their party bureaucratic planners distrust change and seem incapable of it. Every bead of their blood cries out against innovation. They are suffering an *angst* about computers, fearful of putting them into the homes of the people lest they lose control over them. It is the Americans who are the revolutionaries of today.

How the gods of history must laugh when they see the army of Soviet technicians, high in their Washington embassy at Mount Alto in Georgetown, spying on the telephone and microwave telecommunication system of America, while they themselves fear to establish one for their own industry and people!

Max Lerner is a nationally syndicated columnist.