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WHO IS WINNING THE SPY WAR?

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ROBERT CALDWELL

The espionage revelations of recent years show that Soviet intelligence penetrated almost every U.S. national security agency, doing incalculable harm in the process. But the Soviets, too, have suffered serious intelligence losses, including, no doubt, some that Washington never will publicize and Moscow never will acknowledge.

Who, then, is winning the spy war?

Without access to the intelligence secrets most closely held on both sides, the answer must remain something of an educated guess. Some of those best equipped to make that guess, however, are deeply worried about America's ability to protect its own vital secrets and ferret out those of the Soviet Union.

George Carver spent 23 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, beginning as a junior officer in 1953 and retiring in 1976 as deputy to the director of central intelligence for national security. Mr. Carver, who is now a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, is dismayed by recent events and not optimistic about the future.

Mr. Carver worries most about counterintelligence, the ability of the United States to prevent Soviet penetrations or, failing that, to discover them in time to limit the damage.

"We are not doing all that well, partly because counterintelligence is a fairly thorny nettle for a democratic society," Mr. Carver said in a recent interview.

"Good counterintelligence goes against the grain of much in our society — civil liberties, for example. That does not mean we have to become a police state, but it does mean that certain things must be done that some civil libertarians might not like," he said.

Mr. Carver listed three essentials the United States is to possess an adequate counterintelligence capability:

First, see the Soviet Union as the implacable adversary it considers the United States.

Second, keep extensive files on people with access to classified information.

Third, rigorously screen every-one granted security clearances, and reinvestigate them regularly.

Mr. Carver believes that none of these requirements is being met sufficiently today.

"The State Department gave an award to somebody the other day who said that although some Soviet nationals employed at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow were intelligence agents, many others were hard-working and 'loyal' to the embassy.

"That is the sort of naivete that makes us vulnerable to penetration," said Mr. Carver.

"It is hard for some people to accept that there is an adversary (the Soviet Union) that refers to us as the 'main enemy' and works constantly to suborn our people," he added.

Mr. Carver also believes that the battering the Central Intelligence Agency absorbed from Congress during the 1970s sharply diminished the agency's ability to detect some Soviet intelligence operations. Wholesale dismissals of counterintelligence agents and, later, of clandestine service officers, compounded the damage, according to Mr. Carver.

James J. Angleton, who built up the CIA's counterintelligence directorate during the 1960s, was reported recently by The New York Times to have told friends that its staff was reduced from 280 to 80 during the 1973-76 tenure of then-CIA Director William Colby.

Mr. Angleton also reportedly said that many of the directorate's operations were terminated and the remaining staff left paralyzed.

Soon after the Carter administration took office in 1977, a reported 820 members of the clandestine service (officers who work abroad and recruit foreign agents) were dismissed and not replaced. Reportedly, this represented a 40 percent cut in the clandestine service; a deliberate decision by the Carter White House to de-emphasize so-called human intelligence and rely far more on electronic means of gathering information.

Mr. Carver acknowledges that some of this damage was repaired by the Reagan administration, be-

ginning in 1981. But he also sees much bureaucratic lethargy, particularly in a State Department that usually seems institutionally more attuned to diplomacy than security.

In addition, he argues that Congress is notably reluctant to discipline its members and staff for leaks of classified information.

And, for all the Reagan administration's apparent emphasis on improving security, Mr. Carver remains largely skeptical and critical.

"Even in the Reagan administration, we talk a good game but we don't play a good game. We drastically undercut our ability to conduct counterintelligence during the 1970s in ways we have not yet made up for," he added.

John Barron, author of two widely acclaimed books on the KGB and a recent book on the Walker family spy ring, is less critical of the Reagan administration. But Mr. Barron agrees that the nation's counterintelligence capabilities were savaged during the 1970s.

He cites several examples: Congress cut the number of FBI agents by 770 (or nearly 10 percent) from 1976 to 1980. Congress also slashed the numbers of Defense Department security officers from 3,000 to 1,740. As a direct result, a backlog of about 84,000 incomplete background investigations accumulated. That prompted the Pentagon to cease making reinvestigations of people possessing top-secret security classifications.

Had such a reinvestigation been conducted on John A. Walker Jr., head of the Walker spy ring, his espionage for the Soviets almost certainly would have been detected years before he finally was arrested in 1985. Even then, it took a stroke of luck to catch him.

"Remember that Walker would be spying today if his (former) wife had not turned him in," recalled Mr. Carver.

The reductions in FBI ranks came during a period in which the numbers of Soviet and Soviet-bloc personnel, plus those stationed in the United States from other communist nations, rose to more than 4,000. Virtually all intelligence experts agree

that at least one-third of this number were professional intelligence officers.

The FBI simply lacked the numbers of counterintelligence agents needed to maintain adequate surveillance of that many spies.

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Roger Young, formerly an FBI specialist in counterintelligence and an assistant to FBI Director William Webster from 1980 until 1984, acknowledges the deficiency. "We didn't have the numbers to surveil everybody we thought was an intelligence agent," Mr. Young said during a recent interview.

However, Mr. Young said increases in FBI strength ordered soon after President Reagan took office reduced the odds against U.S. counterintelligence.

Mr. Barron cites the even more effective, and dramatic, measures finally ordered last year by President Reagan. In response to the horrendous damage inflicted by the Walker spy ring, Mr. Reagan in March 1986 began ordering reductions in the numbers of Soviet KGB and GRU (military intelligence) agents permitted in the United States under diplomatic cover.

In all, 179 KGB and GRU officers were ordered expelled from the United States last year or prevented from returning. According to Mr. Barron, the expulsions included virtually the entire KGB and GRU leadership at the Soviet Embassy in Washington and the Soviet U.N. Mission in New York. Mr. Barron also says that the expulsions completely wiped out the KGB residency at the Soviet Consulate in San Francisco.

These mass expulsions apparently prompted Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to retaliate last October by withdrawing all 260 Soviet workers from the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. Although it greatly inconvenienced U.S. diplomats, it also forfeited a principal means for Soviet penetration of the embassy.

In addition to these pluses, Mr. Barron notes that the KGB and the Soviet Union are now suffering ideological defections — in effect, rebellions within the elite of Soviet intelligence.

Among recent examples:

Levchenko, KGB Col. Vitaly Yurchenko and the KGB resident in London, Oleg Gorzdievski. According to some reports, Mr. Gorzdievski had been working for Britain's external intelligence agency, MI-6, for 13 years when he defected in 1985.

Mr. Barron also is encouraged by political developments in Washington, namely the "re-emergence of bipartisan support, and popular support, for stronger counterintelligence."

Nevertheless, Mr. Barron readily concedes the great damage caused by the Walker spy ring, by CIA and National Security Agency turncoats, and by other Americans who chose to sell out their country. The 32 Justice Department prosecutions for espionage since 1982 reflect, in part, more vigilant, effective counterin-

telligence. But they also reflect Soviet successes in suborning Americans into espionage and treason.

"Yes, we've taken some enormous losses ... (such as) the Walker-Whitworth case, and the Moscow Embassy case apparently compounds the damage inflicted on our communications security," Mr. Barron said.

"It is no secret that our technological means of collection (satellites, etc.) are excellent. And if six agents were lost, as reported, because of the Moscow Embassy case, it at least attests to our ability to run some agents inside the Soviet Union, although our efforts in this field compared to those of the Soviets are infinitesimal."

Old CIA hand George Carver is decidedly less encouraged.

"It is true that our technical intelligence-gathering capabilities are very good. But our human-assets work is not that easy. And it is going

to become progressively more difficult as we demonstrably lose our ability to keep secrets.

"There will be less cooperation from friendly intelligence agencies and fewer people willing to risk themselves by working with us. ... It's not a very encouraging picture. Looking at what happened from 1980 to 1985, it is difficult to be optimistic."