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Spying's Declining Stakes

The spy John Walker Jr. sold the Soviets blueprints of American coding equipment. The damage to U.S. security was profound. "If there had been a war, we would have won it," remarked Vitaly Yurchenko, the KGB official who defected to the United States and then defected back to the Soviet Union. Yurchenko was characteristically confused. If there had been a war, no one would have won.

Three former Marine guards at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow are now under arrest. Two are charged with allowing Soviet agents virtual free run of the embassy, including the most secure rooms on the building's seventh floor. One of the Marines, Sgt. Clayton J. Lonetree, reportedly admitted that he fell for a Soviet employee who worked at the embassy and then cooperated with her "uncle," a man named Sasha. In such a way did the Philistines give Samson a haircut.

For the United States, the arrest of two alleged spies is an almost commonplace event. In the last year or two, a gaggle of them has been shipped off to the clink. Walker, his son, his brother and an associate, Jerry Whitworth, were among the first. A former employee of the top-secret National Security Agency, Ronald Pelton, sold information to the Russians. Jonathan J. Pollard spied for Israel and Larry Wu-Tai Chin spied for communist China.

All these operations have a few things in common. Either at the time of the arrest or just before sentencing, a high U.S. official—often a U.S. Attorney—estimated the damage as incalculable. Sometimes this was echoed by a high administration official. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger offered such an assessment in the Pollard case.

Second, none of the alleged or convicted spies turned traitor for ideological reasons. These were not the contemporary equivalents of the communist spies of the 1950s. Pollard comes closest, but even he apparently just wanted to help Israel, not harm the United States. For him, the Soviet-U.S. struggle was totally extraneous. No matter. Based on the Chicken Little statements of the prosecutor and Weinberger, a judge sentenced Pollard to life—the same sentence given to spies who sold information to Russia, our so-called mortal enemy.

Third—and maybe most interesting—all these operations seem to embody a nonconformist wisdom. It's hard to know precisely what's in the mind of a spy, but the actions and statements of some of them add up to a rebuttal of the remark made by Yurchenko—"If there had been a war, we would have won it." What the spies seem to be saying is, "Nonsense. The stakes were never that high."

Experts concede they have a point. That hardly means that the information spies peddle is not important, maybe critically important. But none of it can essentially change the Soviet-U.S. equilibrium. Neither side can win the next war. One side may be able to survive it better than the other, but winning—as the word has always been used—is no longer possible. What we are talking about, instead, are degrees of losing a war after which, as someone has remarked, the living would envy the dead.

That reality makes spying less damaging than it used to be. There is no single piece of information—mobilization plans, railroad capacities—that can substantially affect the outcome of the next war. The era of Mata Hari and Benedict Arnold is over. Only in newspaper headlines and the sentencing of judges does spying retain its old importance. The spies, it seems, know better. What they do is too damaging to be called a game, but it has elements of one. We spy, they spy, but nothing fundamentally changes.

None of this excuses spying, which is treason by another name. It just puts it into a contemporary perspective—one that prosecutors, judges and administration officials seem to lack. The tip that armies are on the move now comes from satellites, and scholars discern from published papers in libraries what femmes fatales used to get in the boudoir. The last romantics of espionage turn out to be government officials who, for budgetary or career reasons, imbue spies with an importance they don't have. Like their counterparts in Moscow, they have a stake in insisting that the latest spy caught represents the most severe, damaging breach of security since—well, since the last breach of security.

Handcuffed and hang-faced, the wretched spies go off to jail, retaining their ultimate secret: their notoriety is only partly deserved. Not so their jail sentences.