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The wooing of Americans to win national secrets

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WASHINGTON — An FBI agent testifies about how he became a spy for the Soviet Union. Members of a U.S. Navy family are accused of espionage. Spies are swapped at high noon in the middle of a Berlin bridge linking East and West.

Rarely has such a series of events drawn public attention so dramatically to the enemy agents in our midst. Their assignment: To carefully and insidiously dupe vulnerable Americans into selling the nation's deepest secrets.

The FBI believes that about 30 percent of the 2,584 officials working for Soviet Union, Soviet-bloc and Cuban diplomatic and commercial facilities in the United States are intelligence operatives. That's 775 spies.

This network, according to the FBI, is "more numerous, sophisticated and aggressive than ever before."

It seeks to find, woo and entrap malcontents, bankrupts, alcoholics, adventurers, drug abusers and other likely targets among the 4.2 million U.S. military, industrial and civilian personnel with access to government secrets. So plentiful are those secrets that, if stacked, they would stretch higher than eight Washington Monuments.

Over the last 20 years, foreign intelligence agents have obtained classified information on the MX and Minuteman missiles, nuclear defense capabilities, air defense plans, satellites, radar technology and installations, laser research, Central Intelligence Agency operations, NATO defenses, secret codes and, in the case of the alleged Walker spy ring, submarine warfare.

There are more people facing espionage charges in the United States than ever before, the FBI says.

An American double agent for 10 years, identified only as Sgt. Smith, told the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee's permanent subcommittee on investigations in April that the KGB, the Soviet equivalent of the CIA, is directing a "pervasive, relentless and skilled assault on U.S. military members and government employees."

Smith said that "on any given day, many Americans and others from Western nations are being cultivated and assessed for potential use by the KGB. Of these, some will be selected for a pitch."

An evaluation of "significant espionage cases" by the Defense Intelligence Agency, which screens the vast majority of individuals with access to U.S. secrets, listed the motives of Americans who were recruited, or volunteered, to turn over classified information to foreign agents.

By far, the leading motive was money.

Smith said the Soviets "think all Americans are money-hungry. They believe money talks, that all Americans believe that. That is something, I think, they would use on anybody."

Disgruntlement was a distant second to money in the compilation of motives for American espionage, followed by blackmail and ego satisfaction. Other reasons for spying included naivete, a Russian heritage, ideology and sex.

In recent cases, a new breed of spy has surfaced — a person who is excited by the intrigue of spy thrillers and seeks to live a fictional fantasy.

Earlier this month, Richard W. Miller, the first FBI agent to be charged with espionage, testified that he was acting out "a James Bond kind of fantasy" when he became sexually involved with a Russian woman accused of being a Soviet spy.

FBI agents have reported finding stacks of spy novels in the homes of many American spies. John A. Walker Jr., accused mastermind of a naval spy ring, read spy novels and spoke glowingly of the cloak-and-dagger glamor of his job as a Norfolk, Va., private eye.

To Pentagon intelligence analysts, the most revealing textbook case of espionage involved William Holden Bell, an American engineer, and Marian Zacharski, a Polish secret agent who was among the four captured spies traded for 25 Western agents on a Berlin bridge June 11.

In Bell, the foreign agent found a combination of human frailties that led to betrayal.

Report on the espionage issue

Their association began innocently enough. It was in the fall of 1977 that Bell first met Zacharski, the charming young West Coast manager of the Polish American Machinery Co.

They played tennis and shared a mutual interest in the area's flourishing aerospace industry. Bell, then 57, was an engineer for the Hughes Aircraft Co. with 25 years of experience in defense work. Zacharski, then 25, sold industrial equipment to aerospace firms.

Bell then was emerging from a low point in his life. His 19-year-old son

had died in a camping accident in Mexico, his 29-year marriage had ended in divorce and alimony payments of \$200 a week, his debts had driven him into bankruptcy, and the government was after him for back taxes.

"Zacharski and his wife moved into the apartment complex, and I began to play tennis [with him] on a daily basis. He slowly became my best friend. He was about the age of my oldest son who had been close to his mother and quite distant from me since our divorce," Bell said in subsequent testimony.

In mid-1978 Zacharski began asking Bell for help, innocuous help at first. Zacharski asked Bell to make sales contacts for him. Bell did, and Zacharski paid him \$5,000 for his efforts as "a consultant." Then Zacharski asked for printed materials from Hughes that would alert him to sales opportunities.

It was not until nearly a year after they had met that Bell first gave secret material to Zacharski. At the tennis court in October or November 1978, Bell showed his Polish friend a copy of Bell's proposal for a disguised radar system to enable tanks to fool enemy targets. "I was proud of it, and I gave it to him," Bell recalled.

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When Bell's building was converted to condominiums, Zacharski gave Bell \$12,000 to help him buy his apartment. Soon Bell was microfilming documents on advanced radar designs and selling them to Zacharski. Bell made several trips abroad to meet Polish agents. With the money he received, he bought a red Cadillac, a \$2,000 necklace for his second wife and a vacation to Rio de Janeiro.

For almost two years Bell said he thought Zacharski worked for an American company and was simply doing some industrial spying to get a jump on competitors.

Bell was sentenced in December 1981 to an eight-year prison term. Zacharski's life term ended on the bridge in Berlin on June 11.

What the case amply illustrated, Pentagon analysts wrote, was how "a skilled salesman and master persuader," using the seemingly harmless guise of a commercial rather than a diplomatic position, could create a false impression of "friendship and good will."

Zacharski was willing to spend almost a year "simply making friends with his prospect, insinuating himself into his personal life, meeting and befriending his family, assessing his character traits and flaws, learning his likes and dislikes (and sharing them), discerning his weaknesses and, above all, his needs."

The barrier between an innocent relationship and a criminal conspiracy was bridged, the Defense Department analysts said, by "first requesting unclassified and seemingly innocent items" and by "offering the prospect of a consulting arrangement as a prelude to espionage."

Sgt. Smith's decade of experience as a U.S. double agent disclosed a similar pattern of KGB operations.

Smith told the Senate subcommittee that when he was stationed in Bangkok and had access to classified data, he often played chess in a bar. A man he came to know as "Tori" approached him one day. They chatted about chess and met in succeeding days in coffeehouses and restaurants at Tori's expense.

"Tori wanted me to get to know, accept and trust him," Smith said. Finally, almost hesitantly, he mentioned that a military phone book from my unit would be of use to him, and he asked me to get a copy of it for him. The phone book I provided for my friend a few days later was gladly received and Tori insisted that I accept several hundred dollars for all my trouble. ...

"And so my conditioning continued, as Tori requested next a staff wiring diagram and then other apparently harmless, unclassified items. I was generously rewarded for all of them. ...

"He was simply getting me in the habit of furnishing what he requested ... He never directly asked me to be a spy. At some unspoken point, all that simply became understood."

Smith said that military personnel are frequent targets for Soviet and other hostile agents. "Quite literally,

it could happen to anyone," he said.

Phillip A. Parker, assistant director of the FBI's intelligence division, said that Soviet-bloc agents also prey on foreigners who work in sensitive positions in the United States and may be subject to blackmail.

Sen. Sam Nunn (D., Ga.), ranking minority member of the Senate subcommittee, said that one weakness of the U.S. national security system is that more than 10,675 people from countries of eastern Europe have been — or are being — cleared for access to classified materials even though there is no reliable way of checking on them.

"That's an awful lot of people — almost 11,000 people on whom we have inadequate backgrounds," Nunn said.

But perhaps the biggest flaw in the complex U.S. system of security clearances is the failure to periodically re-examine cleared individuals for clues to changes in their lives that may make them more susceptible to the tactics of foreign agents. Studies of espionage cases show that the targets of Soviet agents are individuals who already have been cleared for access to defense secrets.

But, as the Senate committee heard in April, the Defense Investigative Service is so understaffed and overworked that it could take 10 years to catch up on its huge backlog of required re-examinations.