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Office of Current Production and Analytic Support
CIA Operations Center

News Bulletin : The Washington Times, Page A3

5 February 1986
Item No. 4

CIA ignored Chin's polygraph

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Accused spy Larry Wu-Tai Chin failed the only lie-detector test he took during more than 30 years as a CIA translator, but the polygraph results were not reviewed by CIA security for more than a decade, according to an intelligence source.

Mr. Chin's trial began yesterday in U.S. District Court in Alexandria, with a government prosecutor charging that the CIA veteran had access to — and passed on — highly sensitive information about U.S. policy toward China and intelligence efforts targeted against the communist nation.

"The classified documents that Chin had access to were often the same documents that were sent to the secretary of state, to the National Security Council, to the secretary of defense, to the vice president and to the president of the United States," Assistant U.S. Attorney Joseph Aronica told the crowded courtroom.

Mr. Chin, the subject of a two-year FBI investigation, faces 17 counts of espionage, tax evasion and failure to report a foreign bank account stemming from an alleged 34-year career as a "mole" in the CIA.

The intelligence source, who declined to be identified, said Mr. Chin's 1970 polygraph test revealed deception in response to loyalty questions — but that Central Intelligence Agency security officials failed to review the test until 13 years later, when the FBI began its investigation of Mr. Chin.

A pretrial memorandum submitted by prosecutors Monday stated that Mr. Chin told FBI agents he passed the polygraph test. Mr. Chin said the questions were vague and that he might have failed if he had been questioned in his native Cantonese instead of English.

Prosecutors said they plan to introduce the results of Mr. Chin's polygraph test as evidence in the trial.

Gen. Richard Stilwell, a retired Army officer who headed the Pentagon's review commission on security procedures last year, confirmed yesterday that Mr. Chin was given a polygraph examination in 1970, but he did not disclose the results.

Reports that Mr. Chin was given only one polygraph test, that it indicated deceptive answers and that this was not investigated have raised doubts within the administration about CIA security procedures, the intelligence source said.

Last September, CIA officials confirmed that the agency's security chief, William Kotapish, had been transferred to another CIA division, but said the move was not related to any security problems.

Mr. Kotapish was replaced by a CIA official with no operational experience, the intelligence source said. Traditionally, CIA security officials have been appointed from within the agency's operations directorate, the source said.

Prosecutors said they plan to introduce the results of Mr. Chin's polygraph test as evidence in the trial.

In court yesterday, Mr. Aronica charged that "for 30 years Chin lived a lie, a double life," by spying for China's Ministry of Public Security while working for the Foreign Broadcast Information Service and other more sensitive branches of the CIA.

"Chin's duplicity is highlighted in July of 1981" when, two weeks after he was honored at a CIA ceremony, he traveled to Hong Kong and the nearby island of Macao to meet with the second in command of China's intelligence service, Mr. Aronica told the nine-woman, three-man jury.

An attorney for Mr. Chin conceded that his client passed on documents to the Chinese in return for cash, but said the documents were harmless and part of a plan by the Chinese-born CIA veteran to foster better relations between the two nations.

"Nothing at all about submarines, atomic bombs, guns, troop movements" was taken, said attorney Jacob A. Stein. "Nothing at all of that kind."

Mr. Chin, 63, plans to testify on his own behalf, Mr. Stein said.

Mark Robert Johnson, a special agent with the FBI's counterintelligence unit and the prosecution's first witness, testified that at a Nov. 22 interview prior to his arrest, Mr. Chin admitted passing documents classified as "secret" to the Chinese at regular meetings in Hong Kong and Toronto.

"He said he has passed so many documents that he couldn't recall any specific one that he had passed," Mr. Johnson testified.

"He said, 'Morally, I was right. Legally, I know I'm guilty,'" said Mr. Johnson, who also quoted Mr. Chin as saying, "The fact that I took money is what really hurts."

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