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Why Can't We Catch Spies?

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Two kinds of damage are likely to flow from the spying operation now in the news. The first is the damage to security from the transmittal of the information itself to the Soviet Union. This is said by many military and intelligence higher-ups to be serious, and, by some, to be catastrophic. You and I will never know which because candor can hardly be expected or demanded of government on such a question. The people in charge do not have a responsibility to help the Russians understand any better than they already do the significance of what they have been getting.

You will nevertheless, of course, hear a lot of authoritative-sounding pronouncements on the subject, made to reinforce the speaker's longstanding bias. The catastrophe school will suggest that the nation's seaborne deterrent has been so severely compromised as to mandate a new infusion of other weapons—land-based missiles, bombers and so forth. The opposite, no-big-deal school will argue that little of importance has actually been compromised so that our deterrent is still secure enough to justify the weapons cuts and arms-control measures they have long supported.

All this is a manifestation of the second kind of damage the poor old nation is likely to sustain as a consequence of the spying revelations. That is the damage that flows from the public reaction to it. Let's face it: we really are awful at this. Any trauma in American public life seems invariably to produce the most disgusting wallow in pretentious social-science generalizations and mindless lesson-drawing. After the assassinations of the 1960s, committed by a handful of warped individuals, the pop psychiatrists and amateur anthropologists among us kept explaining that these murders only demonstrated what a violent and no-good people we (all) were. Now we are beginning to endure the first wave of psychologizing and anthropologizing about the spy story.

Missing Patriotism: It is not a whole lot better. The relatively low-ranked Navy personnel who have been charged in this case, along with a number of other clerks and foot soldiers who have been convicted of selling secrets for money over the past several years, have given rise to yet another generational indictment about missing patriotism and failed traditional values, along with a

certain amount of serviceman-bashing. One knows that it can only be a matter of time now until someone attributes the alleged willingness of these men to sell secrets to the Russians to the absence of prayer in their schoolrooms when they were young and someone else says they did it because the prospect of nuclear war is so terrible that they had become psychically numbed and victims of anomie.

The trouble with this kind of palaver is that it diverts attention from what we *should* be thinking about as a result of this story: the quality of our system of maintaining national-security secrets and clearing and managing those who have them. I am aware that anyone who works in my line of

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business has a credibility problem here. Doesn't the press routinely violate government secrecy rules? Of course we do. But that is largely because the system of classifying and maintaining those secrets is so overblown and defective and ridiculous and unworthy of respect that no one takes it seriously, including large numbers of government officials who get publicly most exercised over leaks from time to time.

It's not just that unimaginable amounts of routine material, including even newspaper clippings, are classified "secret": it's also that material that no doubt should be held secret regularly turns up in public places, put there by the government itself. In case after case where the government has raised hell with some journalist for revealing its hottest secrets, these have been shown already to have been put by it in the public domain. And in case after case, it has seemed as if the most junior, unchecked-out kind of personnel have been able to walk unimpeded into areas of great sensitivity and emerge with salable documents.

The kind of headless incompetence I am

talking about exists as well in many clearance procedures. Everyone who has been in Washington a while has clearance-interview stories. I was somberly grilled a few years back about the ages of a former colleague's four children by an agent who wouldn't take statements like "There's a boy around eight, I think" for an answer. Someone later told me this was a clever way of establishing how well I knew the subject, which seemed kind of dumb, especially since the man had already been ensconced in his new job for six weeks at the time of the interrogation. Once I was unable to persuade another interlocutor that I had no idea why an acquaintance had voted for a Communist candidate in a municipal election in New York City in the late 1930s, as I had never heard anything about it and had myself been eight years old in Seattle at the time. He was unconvinced. A friend of mine in the State Department told me that he was visited by a security man in the late 1960s asking him if he knew anything about "someone named Averell Harriman."

Problem: I don't know why so many people who understand the ill effects that over-bureaucratization, personnel inflation, busywork and the paper blizzard have had on domestic programs seem unable to accept that these things have happened in security as well. Our military and intelligence establishments are suffering from the same diseases. You can read now that authorities are 10 years behind in some important clearance procedures; you can read how computer technology has compounded an already out-of-control problem; you had better believe that the current case is probably only a shadow of what is going on.

I am not heartened by talk of new security "crackdowns" and the rest: that sounds to me like draconian measures that will continue to miss the main malefactors while harassing everyone else. And I am not persuaded by those who argue (as they argue of assassins) that there's nothing to be done and you can't stop someone who's determined to do the deed. You can't make anything completely secure, but you can do better. Our procedures need a real overhaul. Much of our system is a joke. That—not whose generation, class or profession is at fault—is what we ought to be worried about.