

Why Keep Secrets?

WHAT ARE the secrets the United States is supposed to be keeping at the Moscow embassy, and are they worth keeping? A few days ago a Moscow embassy officer spoke to me about Soviet society with respect, sympathy and insight, and then bitterly added, turning toward the listening wall, "That's what I think; I'll go on

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thinking it; I don't care that you are listening." The KGB listener, if he was at all intelligent, ought to have been edified by what the American had said and reassured that his own country was so perceptively assessed in the heart of the hostile establishment.

Obviously there are secrets to keep. There are names of contacts and spies, whose disclosure gets people killed. There are codes, technical secrets and military contingency plans that should be kept secret. An ambassador and his advisers ought to be able to speak to one another in privacy. Gentlemen ought not read one another's mail, as an American gentleman, Secretary of State Henry Stimson, observed in 1929 — thereby earning the derision of his successors and inferiors.

That was another world, no doubt. But is our world so packed with vital information to be stolen at any cost? My own impression, after a rather long acquaintance with how government policy is developed and a brief and instructive encounter with the trade of intelligence, is that in the area of policy most of what is classified as state secrets ought to be known, or surmised, by any intelligent political professional who reads the newspapers. (This even works reading communist-bloc newspapers. You simply consider what is said in the light of what is not said.)

"Intelligence" too often gets in the way of understanding. The most important spy the West has yet had in Moscow (of whom we know), Col. Oleg Penkovsky, informed the Kennedy White House that the Soviet Union would not go to war in the Cuban missile crisis. Any moderately sophisticated political or military analyst ought to have been able to

do the same.

The objective of most intelligence operations turns out, in practice, to be the penetration of opposition intelligence services. Recent American spy cases have involved betrayals within the CIA and FBI or the theft of U.S. codes and communication methods. The great Soviet spy triumphs in Britain were all inside the British security services. The Soviets did not, so far as we know, penetrate the British cabinet or have their man, or woman, at 10 Downing Street, where British policy might actually have been influenced. Their spies were spying on the British spies spying on them.

The triumph the Soviets narrowly missed in London was to have placed their man, Kim Philby, in the

job of head of British intelligence, which, if you think about it, would have represented a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*. Simply to have done it would have been a formidable feat. Would it really have made a serious difference in the political course followed either by Britain or by the Soviet Union?

National policies are conducted on the basis of national interest, not on what spies report. Leaders, in any case, notoriously believe what they want to believe of the intelligence given them, and disregard what doesn't fit their preconceptions or what they have already decided to do.

Soviet spies in the United States and Britain "stole" the atom bomb. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were

electrocuted in 1953 for doing so. Yet everyone now knows that any country of a certain level of technological sophistication could then, and can now, make atom bombs, thermonuclear bombs and even particle-beam death rays. You can steal other people's techniques to speed things up, saving yourself the trouble of working problems through, but that's the best you can do.

The spies arrested in France, in March, were passing information on a new liquid hydrogen and oxygen engine for the Ariane space launcher. But this does not mean that the Soviets lack the ability to build their own liquid hydrogen and oxygen engine. They were trying to economize on time and resources.

Would we be worse off if the Soviet leadership knew what President Ronald Reagan or Mrs. Margaret Thatcher or Chancellor Helmut Kohl actually say to their associates? Possibly some dangerous illusions would be removed if the Soviets did listen in. Last November French Prime Minister Jacques Chirac said exactly what he thought about Israel and the Palestinians, terrorism and what to do about it, the merits of U.S. world policy and a good many other controversial subjects, in what he thought was an off-the-record conversation with the editor of the *Washington Times*. When this was published verbatim, it cleared the air rather than causing damage.

I realize that what I am saying flies in the face not only of the common wisdom but the entrenched practice of modern government. Nonetheless it is a fact that the intelligence game is to an important extent just that, a game — a sometimes murderous but often absurd game, played for its own sake as well as for public advantage.

Given the nearly two decades of official incompetence or indifference responsible for the United States' now possessing a Moscow embassy building expensively fitted out with Soviet listening devices, the country might do better to go ahead and occupy it. Let American diplomats say to the listening walls exactly what they think about Soviet policy and American interest. Let them say, as my diplomatic acquaintance did: "I say what I believe. I say what I think true." Let the KGB listen. Let the Soviet leadership deal with candor.