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# TV's verdict on spy dust

## Soviets somehow not to blame

**W**ith the disclosure that NPPD, a potentially dangerous chemical substance, was being used on our embassy personnel, it seemed for a time certain that Soviet public relations had suffered a mortal blow.

For, in employing hazardous chemicals, the Soviets had put themselves in a spotlight no malefactor can hope to escape — had brought themselves, that is, to the attention of media talents honed on scandals about toxic waste, chemical leaks, nuclear drips, and various similar calamities.

Thus, from their watch over the landfills of New Jersey, the nation's nuclear plants, the gates of Union Carbide, an army of reporters would surely descend — figuratively speaking — on the Soviet Union.

How could the Soviets have made such a miscalculation?

Anyone enjoying speculation along these lines would soon, of course, understand that he had failed to reckon with a certain element deeply ingrained in our media, a shining example of which was to appear that very evening in the commentary of John Chancellor, "NBC Nightly News."

The Soviets' use of the "spy dust," Mr. Chancellor assured us, was "basic to the tradecraft of espionage."

There were all sorts of these devices, he would have us know, in use by all sorts of governments; and further, he had the word of an "expert" on such matters, who could testify that the Russian spy dust was "rather primitive."

There we had, then, the picture: a spy war between the United States and the Soviet Union, both sides of which employ the same tactics, making them, by extension, morally

indistinguishable from one another: a war employing professionals who simply go about their business, of which chemical trace dust, carcinogenic or otherwise, is a part.

This is, of course, roughly the view of the conflict to be found in the fiction of John LeCarre, in which the agents of the West equal — when they do not exceed — the squalid degeneracy and cynicism of their KGB counterparts.

Something is, of course, missing from the picture of events so equably presented on "NBC Nightly News" — that being the purposes for which the Soviets had intended their "spy dust," which purposes Mr. Chancellor, for one reason or another, neglected to mention.

For that spy dust was, in fact, a chemical spread about the U.S. Embassy and its environs for the sole purpose of enabling the Soviets to trace contacts between their citizens (dissidents or those seeking to emigrate) and U.S. Embassy personnel.

Indeed, this chemical, then, represented here as but another weapon in one spy system against another spy system — just another in everybody's bag of tricks — is, as it happens, as perfect a symbol as we could wish of that unique and most distinguishing feature of totalitarian dictatorship: namely the effort to control every facet of its citizens' lives, their movements, their contacts with the outside world.

Having now advanced Theme 1 on the spy-dust story, our "Nightly

News" commentary proceeded to its central motif: the motives which the U.S. government had for disclosing such a story now.

These, it could not by now have surprised anyone to learn, were — to Mr. Chancellor's way of thinking —

"political," a point of view we were to hear all through the course of a long night and into the morning.

On CBS's "Nightwatch," a U.S. intelligence expert, under the impression that he had come on the program to discuss Soviet spy techniques, was soon put right about this misapprehension.

**A**sks not less than five successive questions about why the United States was disclosing this story, a succession led off with anchor Fred Graham's urgent inquiry: "Is the U.S. government putting on a 'Chicken Little' act — the sky is falling?" (followed by "Is this a tempest in a teapot?"), the guest was soon brought round to an understanding of the main theme to be explored.

Whereupon it was not long before we learned that the Soviets' use of this chemical was likely, in fact, a response to the increasingly aggressive activities of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency — in short, the familiar theme that what the Soviets do is a response, a necessary response, engendered by some threat by the United States.

The morning shows, in turn, brought us correspondent Robert Kiser of *The Washington Post*, appearing on the "CBS Morning News."

There, that reporter confessed his "bafflement" over what the Reagan administration was trying to do —

given that it had sent "three successive negative signals" to the Soviets in just a few days, and all prior to the summit.

On NBC's "Today" show, along about the same time, anchor Bryant Gumbel was providing an analysis of his own, suggesting that the United States might be attempting to distract the world from the negative effects of its anti-satellite experiments.

Thus had the story on the use of chemical agents by the Soviets been transformed into a story of U.S. motives, U.S. deception.

And here we leave it, but not without first pausing to note, as we have had reason to so often, the meaning of such conversions. For to have watched the progress of this story was to have seen clear proof, again, of a singular incapacity — the incapacity of our media to focus their cannons of distrust on targets other than the government closest to home.

All this has been explained, again and again, as the obligation of a free press, a militance pursued in the noblest of causes.

What it is, far more certainly, is a form of illness peculiar to the democracies of our time.