
Eyes on the Spies

Trial of Ex-CIA Official Clair George Becoming an Espionage Event

7/29/92

By Benjamin Weiser
Washington Post Staff Writer

Spies in the first row, spies in the second row, spies sprinkled throughout Courtroom 19. At the trial of Clair George, the spies—actually, retired spies—seem to outnumber the usual suspects who fill the spectator seats at U.S. District Court. They have come to see their former leader and a former colleague face off in what has become the hottest ticket in town for the intelligence community.

George, an admired 33-year veteran who rose to the pinnacle of his

profession in 1984 to become the chief of clandestine operations worldwide for the CIA, stands accused of lying to Congress, obstruction of justice, and other charges related to the Iran-contra scandal. He has pleaded not guilty. His chief accuser is Alan D. Fiers, once a rising star in the CIA who has turned against his boss in a tension-filled confrontation. Fiers, who has since left the agency, claims George helped orchestrate a coverup of the agency's role in the affair.

The ex-spies have come out of curiosity, out of concern, and some to show support for George, but many

said they were disturbed at what's going on in the courtroom, where they are witnessing for the first time in history two of the agency's most respected officers calling each other liars. "It's sad that it's come to this," declared Angus Thuermer, a retired officer who served with George in India in the 1960s, during a break in yesterday's proceedings.

The confrontation is being watched closely in Washington's intelligence circles, particularly among those who know both men. Said one such intelligence officer: "You have in essence light and dark—that one

See SPIES, C4, Col. 1

Eyes On the Spies

SPIES, From C1

or the other has to be telling the truth. It's a profound ethical dichotomy—these are men of stature, of substance."

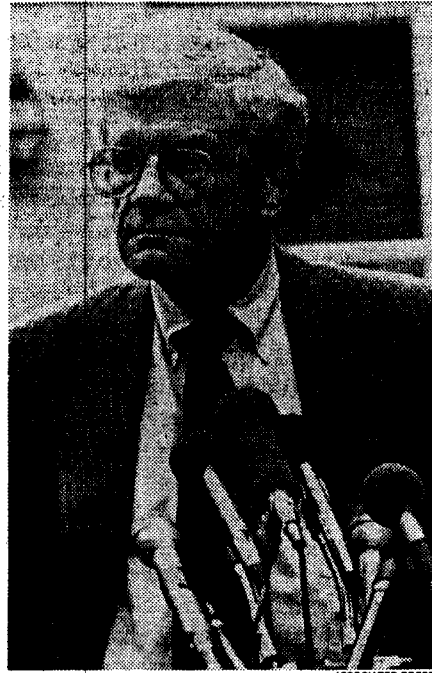
In the courtroom, current CIA officials are conspicuous by their absence—there is said to be one CIA officer monitoring the proceedings from the back row—but those who are present constitute a kind of intelligence roll call from times past. Some do not try to hide their presence, like the two blue-suited, gray-haired gentlemen who slide quietly into seats in the first row, one carrying a copy of the Economist. They are James M. Potts, who once headed the CIA's Africa division, and Richard Stolz, the former London station chief who was brought back in 1988 to become George's successor. Both are part of a core group of retired CIA officials who have started a legal defense fund to assist George and other CIA employees who have come under investigation by the Independent Counsel's office.

The group in the second row are less obvious, keeping their identities more hidden. They arrive each morning, dressed in flowered dresses or gray suits, patiently waiting in the corridor for the courtroom doors to open. They are mostly in their sixties and seventies, and prefer not to identify themselves for the record, but in fact most are retired CIA operatives who have served in clandestine posts abroad, some in dangerous assignments.

When Fiers decided to testify against George, these ex-spies were forced to take sides—and did, stopping their retirement activities and going to work for George's defense team. One, a lawyer, even sits at the defense table. They call themselves the "readers" and have spent the last half year culling through millions of classified documents that were turned over to George's lawyers by the government, trying to find material that will bolster his defense.

For some of the "readers," it has been invigorating, like coming together for one more mission. But it has been disconcerting too, for they find themselves now working against the United States government.

One who allowed herself to be quoted, 65-year-old Mary Gormley, served with George in Mali in 1964. Now a Montgomery Hospice Society worker, she said she has some sympathy for Fiers's actions—"He did what he thought he had to do"—but adds: "I am unabashed in my support for Clair George."



Former CIA espionage chief, Clair George, whose trial has lured many spies to the courtroom.

Support for Fiers is less obvious among the former intelligence officers here, and there was palpable tension in the courtroom when he appeared Tuesday to testify against George and again yesterday when Fiers broke down in tears on the stand. The two men's eyes have met only briefly, with George watching impassively as Fiers testifies.

Fiers and George represent two generations of CIA officer: Fiers, a decorated Marine veteran who joined the agency in 1967, has broad shoulders and was a college football star at Ohio State under the legendary Coach Woody Hayes. Fiers has testified that he once considered going into coaching himself, and repeatedly uses football terminology to describe his actions, such as "leaning into it" and "encroaching the line."

George, who turns 62 Monday, entered the CIA in 1955 after serving in the Army during the Korean War. Outgoing and gregarious, he played drums in school and in jazz bands around his western Pennsylvania hometown of Beaver Falls. At Penn State, he was a debating champ. George has maintained strong ties to his hometown, and his friends there are unwavering in their support.

Indeed, not everyone in the courtroom is an ex-spook. Jack Kelly, owner of Kelly's Hardware Store in Beaver Falls, flew to Washington and made a surprise appearance in the spectator section yesterday.

"I came 'cause I love the guy. When I walked in the door, he lit up like the sun," Kelly said.