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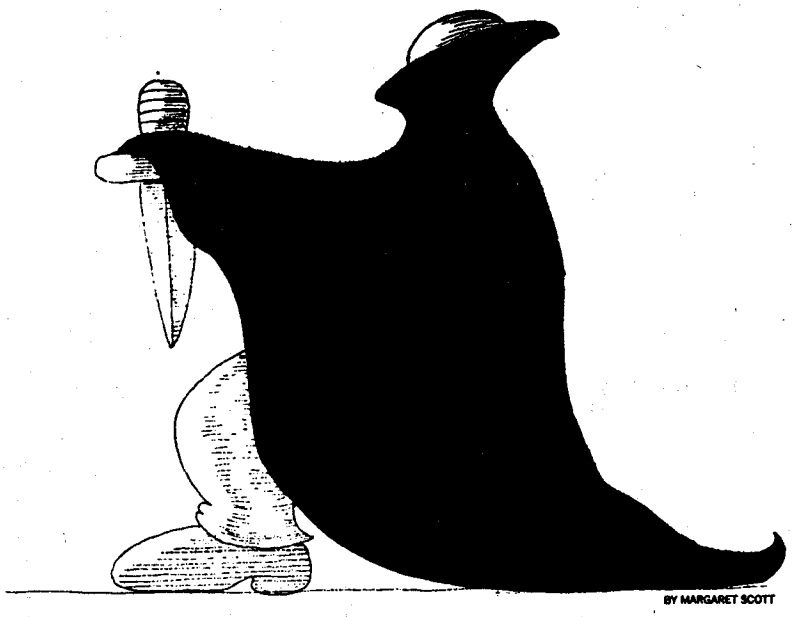
A Leaner, Keener CIA


BY MARGARET SCOTT

The number of our spies and counterspies who have been caught working for the other side reflects psychological, intellectual and moral changes in the great game of agent espionage since the mid-1980s. Ending the CIA's continuing Cold War culture, focusing its mission and cutting back its excessive size will change the environment in which such treason has grown.

As communism and the Soviet bloc began to come apart, our side expected that KGB agents, having lost their moral and political raison d'etre, would begin to offer themselves to the CIA in large numbers. This happened. What we did not anticipate, however, was that the same phenomenon would affect a number of our own operatives.

The game has always involved deception, duplicity and the art of suborning people to betray their government, colleagues and friends. The Army attracts a certain percentage of people who experience a pathological enjoyment, not simply satisfaction, in killing people who are trying to kill them.

Likewise, CIA operations, as distinct from its analysis side, attracts some individuals whose pleasure in the game of betrayal is perverse. The great majority of CIA operations officers are morally responsible persons of high integrity, but many of us in the Foreign Service have had dealings with the other type. When the excitement and intrigue of subverting the monolithic, closed and threatening Soviet system ended, a few of the gung-ho performers turned to the only equally satisfying and more dangerous alternative—betrayal of their own country.

The money was only incidental. As in several of John le Carre's novels, for these turncoats in the spy business, the primary reward of betrayal was the psychic one. But still they required a rationale, and again as portrayed in Smiley's adventures, the principal rationale for the mole was a sense of the uselessness, even absurdity of the business. This was Aldrich Ames's stated justification for his actions—it was all a game anyway. The information that Ames, Harold Nicholson and Earl Edwin Pitts sold (or allegedly sold) to Moscow was nearly all inside stuff about our spies, counterspies, double agents, moles and "methods and procedures." There was no vital political or security information. Some might die, they would know, but this was the price of playing the game.

The end of the Cold War in fact revealed how much of the espionage conducted by agents had been of little or no value. A great deal of the so-called "human intelligence" (as distinct from technical intelligence) provided to policymakers in Washington and Moscow came from double agents. Last January, former CIA Deputy Director Adm. Bobby Inman told the Presidential Commission on Intelligence that "most if not all human agents [of the CIA] over 20 years were double agents!" Inman, for example, thought that probably all CIA agents in East Germany had been controlled by the Stasi.

The implications are quite astounding. In the case of East Germany alone, literally thousands of intelligence reports, the expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars and hundreds of successful CIA careers were based on information fed to us by our communist enemies. A year ago, CIA Director John Deutch indicated that the pressures to produce were so great that even when the CIA suspected they were being fed reports by KGB-controlled agents, they sent them on to the White House. The agency knew the KGB had authorized the passing of the information but believed the data were nevertheless true. That is the way the double-agent game works—the information is usually not false, it is simply not very important.

Fidel Castro also apparently hoodwinked the CIA and policymakers who read its stuff for more than a decade. In the 1980s, Bill Casey inflated the size of the CIA by one-third, thus expanding the agency's bureaucracy, its make-work dynamic of intelligence collection and among at least a few a sense of malaise. The only consolation is that during the Cold War, the KGB, the Stasi, Cuban intelligence and other communist services possessed even bigger bureaucracies and also spent most of their time collecting false or inconsequential information.

The unholy three—Ames, Nicholson and Pitts—will receive their deserved comeuppance. But the principal question posed by their seedy examples is not one of counterintelligence. Rather it is how to make the CIA a lean and trim organization focused on the clandestine collection of real information vital to U.S. interests that cannot be obtained by overt means. Following this basic criterion, CIA operatives on the ground would devote themselves to trying to find out what the few rogue countries like Iraq, Libya and North Korea are doing and to issues like nuclear and other special weapons proliferation, international terrorism, international crime and violations of international treaties.

These are the tough targets but not so romantic as having drinks with a KGB agent and trying to suborn him. A leaner CIA with more of a non-Cold War culture will be a more effective arm of American foreign policy and will probably generate fewer moles in the future.

The writer is a former deputy assistant secretary of intelligence and research at the State Department.