The compleat spy —as tradesman

ABEL. By Louise Bernikow. Illustrated. Trident. 347 pp. $7.95.

OPERATION OVERFLIGHT: The U-2 Spy Pilot Tells His Story for the First Time. By Francis Gary Powers with Curt Gentry. Illustrated. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. 375 pp. $6.95.

By Thomas Braden

Sometime between 1950 and 1960, the business of spying, which for thirty years or more had been largely ideological, changed sharply. It became a trade, like carpentry or plumbing.

If you look over the list of post-World-War-II spies, they are nearly all traitors, Americans or Englishmen who thought that by serving the Soviet Union they were serving a higher cause; less frequently a Russian who spied on his own country and served freedom, as he thought, by giving secrets to us.

There were, to be sure, some unkempt-minded among them who spied for money and justified their conduct to themselves as being the duty of those possessed of the truth. In any event, their stories are full of the conflict between loyalty to state and loyalty to ideas, however erroneously defined.

There is none of this in the spy of the trade, who is likely to be the spy of the future, now that ideology again seems ambivalent and that there is no black-and-white cause left to fight for except nationalism itself. Two current books make the point. First, there is the story of Francis Gary Powers, the U-2 pilot who was shot down over Russia in 1962, written by Powers and a professional writer, Curt Gentry. Second, there is the story of Colonel Abel, the Soviet spy who was ultimately exchanged for Powers, by Louise Bernikow. Though both are books about the trade, neither is dull, as, for example, a book about plumbing might be dull. In fact, the story of Abel is made fascinating by Miss Bernikow's honest attempt to spell out her man by running down everyone who ever knew him during his long, drab, secret life in American rooming houses. But inner conflict is missing. Abel's letter drops and secret signs on the walls of subway stations have a peculiar fascination but only because they are less known than the tools of other trades. If he had not been caught, he might well have gone on to be commercial attaché in Bonn, or run a branch of the state bank in Sevastopol. He was the compleat spy — but the spy as tradesman.

And Powers tells his story as though he were a TWA pilot on the regular run between Istanbul and Geneva. One has to remind oneself that he was a spy.

There is another aspect in which these stories share

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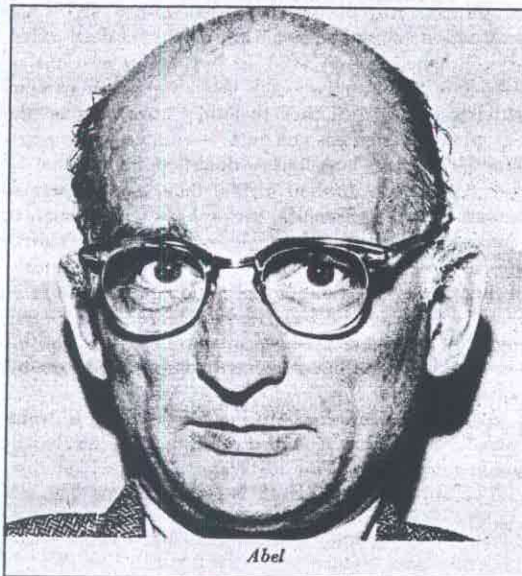

Abel

a common trait. They are both embarrassing. Powers particularly is embarrassing because so many Americans took high moral positions about his conduct after his capture. It is embarrassing to recall that much of the nation thought him a traitor, that Robert Hutchins drew an odious comparison between him and Nathan Hale in order to intone about the state of American morale and that even Powers's superiors in the Central Intelligence Agency were half-convinced he had betrayed them.

His book corroborates what the Agency later found, namely that he had behaved as well as any human being could be expected to behave under the pressure of a narrow escape from death, a long imprisonment, a show trial and disturbing letters from home. The only two state secrets he possessed are still secrets.

Abel too is embarrassing. As Miss Bernikow's story makes clear, the FBI, which was given national acclaim for his capture, deserves no more credit for good police work than does the cop on the beat who picks up the burglar after receiving a tip from an accomplice.

Here, too, there is an interesting analogy. If nations must rely henceforth upon good organization, and good organization men to find out about each other, and if Abel and Powers are prototypes, there is much for rival spy agencies to learn. Powers was sent aloft without instructions about what to do if captured. CIA's cover story assumed his death and the destruction of his plane. When a lucky near miss brought both plane and spy into Russian hands, the story was worse than useless — it became a palpable lie, to the embarrassment of his President and his country.

It was, however, no worse an example of mismanagement than the KGB's insistence that Abel take on as chief assistant a weakling and a drunk named Hayhanen, who eventually turned him in.

So spying has become a trade and must be learned all over again. The spies were not at fault. Abel and Powers were good artisans. But their managers were terrible. They had too long relied upon ideology — Communism on the one hand, the Free World on the other — to give them the secrets they must now obtain by careful craftsmanship.

There must now be men in the United States — less likely in the Soviet Union — who are tradesmen in the British tradition as it was before ideology disturbed the spy's profession. They live, presumably, from decade to decade pursuing their trades as farmers, artisans, picking up a piece of information or working on some long-range project which may or may not pay off. The managers back home can ruin them in a moment. For the sake of the trade, one hopes the managers learned something from Abel-Powers. The ablest plumber can't earn his $16.00 per hour if some fool in the office sends him off with faulty tools to the wrong address.