

*Richard Cohen*

# Who Failed At the FBI?

Back when I was in the insurance business—yes, the storied Cohen of Claims—my company's in-house magazine profiled the personnel manager of one of our branches. He was shown on his boat, in his dandy apartment, behind the wheel of his sports car, on the town with beautiful women and in other ways living beyond his means. Other personnel managers took note, and after an investigation, the guy was fired. Turned out he was taking bribes from employment agencies.

It also turns out that what was done by a mere insurance company was beyond the reach of the vaunted FBI. Back in 1990, the brother-in-law of the convicted spy, Robert Hanssen, noticed that Hanssen was spending too much money for an FBI agent. He reported his suspicions to the bureau and speculated that Hanssen was spying for the Soviet Union. The brother-in-law, Mark Wauck, was no amateur in these matters. He was an FBI agent himself.

Nonetheless, it was an incredible 11 years later, on Feb. 18, 2001, that Hanssen was arrested. In that period, Hanssen disclosed the identity of at least nine Soviet officials who were spying for the United States. Three of them were executed.

He told the Russians about an eavesdropping tunnel under their Washington embassy. He gave them the government's plan for how it would operate in the event of a nuclear war. He provided them with the U.S. intelligence budget. In short, he about cleared the shelves for the KGB and its successor, the SVR.

Some of this was revealed at the

time of Hanssen's arrest, but additional details have been turned up by David A. Vise, a Washington Post reporter and the author of the newly published "The Bureau and the Mole."

He reveals, for instance, that Hanssen allowed a neighbor to watch as he had sex with his wife. (Hanssen set up a closed-circuit video system in his house.) He posted pornographic fantasies on the Internet, not even bothering to use a false name. He had a relationship with a Washington stripper, giving her a Mercedes-Benz and the use of an American Express card. He said he was trying to save her soul. Her soul, if nothing else, cost him a bundle.

Back in February, FBI director

Louis Freeh credited Hanssen's arrest to "counterintelligence at its very best." He said he was "immensely proud of the men and women of the FBI who conducted this investigation," but did not say that Hanssen virtually fell into the bureau's lap when it received a Russian intelligence file. He also did not say that aside from wearing a Stalin mask at FBI picnics, Hanssen could not have done much more to call attention to himself.

This blunder—this example of the FBI flopping on a floor of banana peels—cost America plenty. Taken together with the massive intelligence failure that led to Sept. 11, it is sufficient reason to conclude that something is awfully wrong with the FBI. Just recently, for instance, it was revealed that the FBI was warned back in August that a student pilot might be planning to use a fully fueled commercial airliner as a missile. That student, Zacarias Moussaoui, was recently indicted in connection with the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks—clearly a bit late.

Since Sept. 11, Congress has held off investigating the intelligence failures that led to the worst attack on U.S. soil in history. That's about to change. Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) want to establish a 14-member bipartisan commission. Sen. Robert Torricelli (D-N.J.) wants a 12-member board. But in the GOP-controlled House, and especially in the Bush administration itself, inaction seems to be the order of the day. "The president is focused on the war on terrorism," a White House spokeswoman said.

Fine. But as long as this is a long, continuing war, then it makes sense to have intelligence agencies that are up to the job. Manifestly, that is not the case now. But the Bush administration, which came to Washington like the Romans to Carthage, has become the captive of the very agencies it once was determined to smash. To criticize the intelligence agencies has become the functional equivalent of stepping on the flag.

As the catastrophe of Sept. 11 and the Hanssen case make clear, the FBI and the CIA simply did not do their job. That job is hard, but failure is simply not acceptable. Robert Hanssen, for one, was allowed to spy for a full decade before he was caught. Terrorism crisis or not, it's time to catch the people who didn't catch Hanssen.