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Espionage — Coverage Poses Risks

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When the story broke so promisingly earlier this year, the New York Times called the mysterious KGB master spy "the most valuable defector from the Soviet Bloc . . . in recent years."

It was the first spy tale of 1986: A major general in the Soviet KGB had defected to the West. The CIA was keeping his existence a secret, but he was more valuable than Vitaly S. Yurchenko, the turnabout defector who had been lost back to Moscow.

Then, within 72 hours, the story of the secret defector became, as United Press International put it, "the mystery of the spy who may never have been."

Seen as Trespassers

And now it seems this tale may be best remembered as a parable to the press about the risks of reporting on the secret world of intelligence.

In this darkest part of the governmental forest, the values of free press and an open society are often regarded as unwanted, even dangerous trespassers. The chance the press will err or be manipulated by its sources is greater than anywhere else, and some say the consequences of mistakes are potentially more harmful.

By publishing at all, the press can abort an American clandestine operation—as the Washington Post is said to have done in November—or even cause the death of an American agent.

"It is terrible to say it, but one who does stories about the intelligence community has to lower his expectations of accuracy," said former New York Times reporter Seymour M. Hersh.

'Fifth Man' Is Here

The story of the KGB major general's alleged defection began Jan. 25, when U.S. News & World Report published a report entitled "Defectors: The 'Fifth Man' Is Here."

"In addition to the four spies that the government acknowledges fled to the West," the magazine wrote, "a KGB major general—the highest-ranking defector of them all—was brought to the U.S. last year, well-informed sources told U.S. News & World Report."

He supposedly fled by helicopter from West Germany last spring, was hidden to prevent press leaks before the Geneva summit meeting, and then later settled in the Midwest under a new identity, the magazine reported.

What transpired in reaction to that item is a primer in competitive Washington journalism, particularly when it touches the furtive world of intelligence.

First, when competing news media received advance copies of the magazine, they tried to get independent confirmation and break the story before U.S. News & World Report reached the stands on Monday.

New York Times reporter Philip Shenon spent the preceding Saturday combing Capitol Hill. On its front page Sunday, Jan. 26, the paper quoted what it said were at least two unnamed congressional sources saying the high-ranking KGB officer was providing information that "'is much more important' than any provided" by Yurchenko or other recent defectors.

The story received prominent exposure nationwide via the New York Times news service; it was, for instance, the lead story in that day's Orange County Register.

Other wire services also moved stories, citing U.S. News & World Report and the New York Times as sources.

As usual, competing media prepared "reaction stories" for Monday. Notable was an Associated Press story that said the intelligence committees on Capitol Hill "had been told nothing" about any such defector.

In its third paragraph, however, the AP story offered what seemed additional confirmation:

"However, House Intelligence Committee Chairman Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.) said he had received a 'preliminary report' on the alleged Soviet defector. He declined to comment further until he received a more thorough briefing on the case and said he was 'not yet sure about the information.'"

Hamilton's press secretary, Nick Cullather, now says his boss did not intend to confirm the defector story, and the AP says it did not mean to imply Hamilton was doing so.

'Tantalizing' Remarks

But nonetheless, said AP Washington Bureau chief Chuck Lewis, Hamilton's remarks were "a tantalizing equivocation."

As official Washington resumed work that Monday, the story had entered the city's information bloodstream. Reporters tried the usual sources for comment—the White House, Capitol Hill officials charged with overseeing intelligence agencies, the State Department and the CIA itself.

At the daily White House briefing for reporters, presidential spokesman Larry Speakes issued what the Washington Post called "an unusually flat denial."

"That story is not correct," Speakes said. Which part? "The whole thing."

Off the record, the denials were even stronger.

The CIA, as usual, refused to comment publicly. But off the record, reporters say, the agency denied the story in unusually direct terms.

"As that Monday went on, we were getting total negatives on it," said one reporter who asked for anonymity. "We couldn't find a single source who would confirm in any way."

Tuesday morning, however, the Washington Times quoted Sen. Chic Hecht (R-Nev.) as confirming the story—the first so-called "on-the-record confirmation."

"Where there's smoke there's fire, and I'm sorry about the leak," Hecht, a member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, was quoted as saying somewhat cryptically. The senator, the paper said, "would not provide details."

Reporters went scurrying again, and at a briefing, National Security Adviser John M. Poindexter tried to restate the Administration's denial.

When reporters—who scrutinize all official denials in Washington for possible loopholes—thought Poindexter's denial ambiguous, the White House issued a more cate-

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