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Hecht insists Soviet spy defected to U.S.

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By David Koenig
Review-Journal Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Despite White House denials, Sen. Chic Hecht insisted Wednesday a Soviet intelligence officer defected to the United States last year.

Hecht, R-Nev., confirmed the defection after it was reported over the weekend by the New York Times and U.S. News and World Report. Hecht, a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, declined to give further details of the spy's identity or rank, but said, "Obviously, there is a lot of intelligence to be gained."

Hecht said he decided to confirm the reports, previously attributed to anonymous sources, to "set the record straight."

"The idea was it was not to be known," Hecht said of the reported defection. "There's been a leak on this. There should not have been a leak. There are too many leaks in Washington.

"All we're doing is confirming," he said. "I just wanted to set the record straight."

White House officials continued to deny the reports. Other members of the Senate and House intelligence committees declined to comment.

National security adviser John Poindexter said Tuesday, "There is no such defector either here or in any other country," and presidential spokesman Larry Speakes repeated that assertion Wednesday.

A senior White House official told reporters Wednesday, "There were some judgments and indications that were very, very inconclusive that perhaps somebody somewhere did have a major KGB defector."

But after checking with all U.S. intelligence agencies, "There is no concrete evidence of it," said the official, who spoke on the condition he not be named.

"What would you expect them to say?" Hecht said in response to White House denials. "Of course they're going to say what they said."

Hecht, a former counterintelligence officer with the Army in Berlin in the early 1950s, said defections are kept quiet because Soviet defectors feared "assassination squads," and "because we are able to meet some of their contacts."

Hecht said he doesn't know who leaked news of the defector. "But when you get someone, many different agencies talk to him," he said.

On a related note, Hecht said he opposes giving the FBI responsibility for handling defectors. Some Reagan administration officials reportedly favor such a change, in light of the embarrassing case of Vitaly Yurchenko — the apparent Soviet defector who walked away from his CIA escort at a Washington restaurant and went to the Soviet embassy.

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Hecht said the FBI should only have authority within U.S. borders, and the CIA should have overseas authority.

Putting the FBI in charge of defectors "would go back to the Russian situation, the KGB, where they have jurisdiction in Russia and worldwide," Hecht said.

Hecht defended the CIA's record in the Yurchenko episode, saying the former KGB officer's "psychological situation" led to his decision to return to the Soviet Union.

Hecht said Yurchenko wanted "one huge amount of money and so much a year," and hoped to convince his Soviet lover living in Canada to defect with him, but his dreams crumbled when the woman spurned him.

"I think the criticism of the CIA was absolutely unjustified," Hecht said. "I think they did a good job."

Hecht said some defectors expect too much from U.S. authorities, including payments and special privileges.

"There was a case that happened about two months ago," he said. "The man wanted a driver's license, so the (CIA handler) said, 'You've got to study and take a test.'"

"'You mean to say you can't bring me a driver's license?,'" Hecht quoted the defector. "He couldn't understand in America the CIA could not get him a driver's license without (the man) taking a test."

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