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Defection only conjecture, U.S. says

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By Bill Gertz
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Recent reports that a high-ranking Soviet KGB official had defected to the United States are based an incorrect intelligence assessment, a senior administration official said yesterday.

"There were some judgments and indications that were very inconclusive that perhaps somebody somewhere did have a major KGB defector," said the official, who agreed to comment on the condition that he not be identified.

On Monday, a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Chic Hecht, confirmed weekend reports that the United States was harboring a senior KGB officer who defected from East Germany last spring. When told of the administration's denial, the Nevada Republican replied, "What else do you expect them to say?"

U.S. News and World Report and The New York Times reported last weekend that congressional sources said the KGB officer was a major general with "technical" knowledge. They said he had been cooperating with the United States before defecting and had been resettled under an assumed identity in the Midwest.

U.S. News said in a statement Monday it had relied on "multiple sources" for the story and had been warned to expect official denials.

The White House national security adviser, John Poindexter, issued a statement Tuesday night denying any U.S. knowledge of the defection. "To the best of the knowledge of the United States government, there is no such defector either here or in any other country," he said.

A senior administration official said the White House had questioned all agencies in the U.S. intelligence community. "Rechecking yesterday, through our entire system of intelligence agencies, we found that there was no one that could indicate to us that any country anywhere did have a KGB defector," the official said.

According to the official, Mr. Poindexter told television reporters Tuesday that some officials believed the reports were true, while others did not. There was speculation that a Western ally may be harboring the defector.

The controversy over the defector heated up earlier this week when Mr. Hecht told The Washington Times that reports about the defector were true. "The idea was to keep it very quiet, and I'm sorry about the leak, [but] the story has come into print. This thing should never have been leaked," he said.

There have been a number of Soviet intelligence-service defections, although these remain unconfirmed by U.S. officials, according to intelligence experts.

Last March, a U.S. military transport whisked a Soviet diplomat out of New Delhi, India, to a U.S. military base in Peshawar, Pakistan, and on to the United States, according to intelligence sources. The defection has never been confirmed.

Another mystery defection involves Soviet computer scientist Vladimir Alexandrov, who has been the subject of an international KGB manhunt since he disappeared in Spain last spring.

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