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Electronic surveillance helped trip spy suspect

By Bill Gertz
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FBI counterintelligence agents used interceptions of Soviet embassy telephone calls and spied on the Soviets' military office in Northwest Washington during the recent investigation that lead to quick arrest of suspected Soviet agent Randy Miles Jeffries.

Details of the investigation, contained in court testimony and papers filed in the case, highlight the FBI's growing ability to react swiftly and expertly in counterintelligence investigations.

Mr. Jeffries was arrested Friday, Dec. 20, on espionage charges and was ordered held without bail the following Tuesday by a federal magistrate. A grand jury investigation of the case is pending.

An FBI agent testifying at a preliminary hearing said that federal agents overheard a Dec. 14 telephone conversation with the Soviet military office in Washington through a "sensitive source" — believed to be an electronic interception — and within minutes identified the person offering to sell secret documents about U.S. nuclear war capabilities.

Assistant Attorney General Stephen S. Trott stated recently that "there is a new priority in this administration to find spies," and FBI Director William Webster said new counterintelligence programs involve training more agents, recruiting spies, working with defectors, and increasing electronic and physical surveillance.

As a result, FBI agents have arrested five people on espionage charges since November, including three former employees of the U.S. intelligence community. Since 1980, 33 people were arrested on espionage charges, and there have been 25 convictions, Mr. Webster said in a recent television interview.

FBI Special Agent Michael Giglia testified at a preliminary hearing Tuesday that a telephone conversation overheard Dec. 14 at 4:11 p.m. set in motion a chain of events that lead to the arrest of Mr. Jeffries at a downtown motel Dec. 20.

Electronic intercepts of microwave telephone transmissions are not illegal under current U.S. laws, although the law forbids tapping into telephone wires and lines. Most telephone calls today are sent by microwave transmitters.

Asked about Soviet efforts to intercept American telephone calls in the United States, FBI Director William Webster said in a recent interview that "modern technology permits you to single out and zero in on a specific telephone conversation, particularly if you know the location and the person who is sending it."

Listening in on telephone conversations usually is done by the National Security Agency, which uses ultra-modern electronic listening devices and computer systems to scan the airwaves for key words. The NSA can zero in on specific intelligence targets, such as Soviet bloc embassies.

The interception of the Dec. 14 conversation revealed that a man identifying himself as Dano offered to sell Soviet officials the transcript of a House Armed Services subcommittee closed hearing dealing with the Defense Department's command, control, communications and intelligence program, known as C³I.

Mr. Jeffries' defense attorney, G. Allen Dale, in an apparent effort to force prosecutors to reveal the source of the telephone conversation, asked Mr. Giglia if the FBI heard the conversation directly or from "someone inside the Soviet military office."

The hearing was interrupted by U.S. Magistrate Jean F. Dwyer, who told prosecutors that she would "try to protect [their] sources." However, she ordered Mr. Giglia to reply. He stated that the FBI "actually heard the conversation."

The telephone conversation and FBI spotter agents enabled the agency to discern that Acme Reporting Co. had transcribed the congressional document on C³I, that six black males who worked for Acme lived in the District of Columbia, and that and one — Mr. Jeffries — lived on Rhode Island Avenue. A taxi driver said he had picked up the visitor to the Soviet military office in the 200 block of Rhode Island Avenue NW.

The FBI spotter agents, based outside the Soviet military office, identified a black male leaving a taxicab and entering the office with a briefcase 35 minutes later.

Six days later, FBI agents met with Mr. Jeffries under pretense that he was meeting with a Soviet military intelligence officer. Mr. Jeffries fell for the ruse, even though, according to Mr. Giglia, Mr. Jeffries had received from the Soviets a codeword and what they termed an "initial plan" for transferring documents in exchange for payments.

Mr. Giglia said the meeting was held in room 1005 of the Washington Circle Holiday Inn. FBI agents had placed concealed videotape equipment there and recorded their meeting with Mr. Jeffries, who was told to bring the secret documents, for which he allegedly had requested $5,000 during a meeting at the military office.

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