

ASSOCIATED PRESS
9 June 1985

WHAT ARE AMERICA'S MOST COVETED SECRETS
By HENRY GOTTLIB
WASHINGTON

An American Army officer once joked that a way to stymie Soviet spies would be to feed them all 19.6 million classified U.S. documents, requiring them to spend years sifting the entire pile — much of it useless.

While no one in the Pentagon has taken the suggestion seriously, many intelligence experts agree that the key to espionage is quality, not quantity; that some top-secret leakage harms U.S. security but much of does no damage at all.

What intrigues some analysts about the alleged spying by former Navy communications specialist John Walker Jr. and a band of associates is that the secrets Walker could have passed to the Soviets appear to range from very valuable to highly "perishable" information that wasn't very important.

On the issue of intelligence in general, "there's no laundry list of what's the most important, but it is possible to distinguish between what is highly valuable and what is marginally dangerous if lost," said James J. Townsend, a Soviet affairs expert at the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Highest in value, according to Townsend, would be information that would reveal to the Soviets U.S. sources of information on what the Soviet military machine is doing.

For example, the most damaging loss to U.S. intelligence would be exposure of any well-placed U.S. spies in the Kremlin, or the revelation of U.S. techniques of direct intelligence gathering on Soviet operations.

"The highest priority of any intelligence operation is to find out where the leaks are," Townsend said.

It is for this reason that when spies are discovered, an effort is often made to turn them into double agents or dupe them into passing useless or inaccurate information to their masters.

There are also electronic means of monitoring a potential enemy, and the seriousness of the Walker case stems from his possible access to codes, jamming techniques and other surveillance measures that might have helped the Soviets know how America tracks their ships, Navy officials have said.

Beyond the category of spy vs. spy and the question of how the United States gathers intelligence electronically, the most vital secrets are those that could inform an enemy of a U.S. military vulnerability. Former CIA Director William E. Colby, in a telephone interview, referred to such information as "chinks in the armor," that any country would be desperate to hide.

Pentagon and Capitol Hill sources revealed on Thursday that the CIA is studying whether the Soviet Union can detect and track America's nuclear missile-firing submarines.

The ostensible value of such submarines is their ability to operate unseen, making them invulnerable to attack by Soviet aircraft or ships. The techniques that allow the subs to remain hidden is clearly one of America's closely held of the secrets.

"We've put a lot of eggs in that basket," Townsend said, referring to the key role assigned to missile submarines in U.S. nuclear deterrence strategy.

Another major category of secrets are those governing actions the United States would take if a war broke out. Fortunately, many of these are "perishable," the intelligence community's term for military secrets that are constantly changing and therefore of use to an enemy for only a limited time.

An illustration of such a secret was the Israeli decision, before its invasion of Lebanon in 1982, to use flying drones to spot Syrian anti-aircraft installations in the opening hours of the battle. By using such drones, the Israelis were able to knock out most of the missile sites and gain total air supremacy over the battlefield.

Had the Syrians known such techniques were to be used, they might have been able to hold their fire against the drone aircraft, keeping their missiles intact for use against manned aircraft.

Henry S. Rowen, a former chairman of the CIA's National Intelligence Council, puts codes and other communications information at the top of his list of important secrets.

He also said seemingly small tactical information is usually much more important than plans for disposition of large forces. For example, Rowen said, the tactics to be used by aircraft in penetrating defenses - "how they would go about it" - would be more important than knowing how many aircraft or what types were to be used.

Colby said the Soviets would be very much helped by knowing U.S. nuclear targeting decisions: whether a specific installation or city would be attacked by a slow-speed cruise missile, a submarine missile, a B-52 jet, or if it would be left alone.

He said, however, that the plans for overall U.S. nuclear policy - secret decisions on the conditions that would trigger a nuclear attack - would be less vital because such scenarios have been widely discussed in public and "they (the Soviets) would never be sure how such decisions would be made."

Least worrisome, according to the analysts, would be the loss of actual plans for equipment, even blueprints for tanks, planes, ships and other weapons that had just been fielded by U.S. forces.

"They can read all about it in magazines anyway," Rowen said.

And even many weapons developers - confident that the United States is ahead in hardware - believe in the "eat-my-dust school of technology," Townsend said. "By the time it's deployed they know about it."

EDITOR'S NOTE - Henry Gottlieb has written about military affairs for The Associated Press since 1980 in Europe and Washington.