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The Workaday World Of Listening Devices

U.S. Diplomats Are Used to East-Bloc 'Bugs'

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When two members of Congress returned from Moscow this week and suggested that Soviet listening devices had made the U.S. Embassy inoperable, Soviet KGB agents were not the only ones laughing. A number of career Foreign Service officers, intelligence officers and former ambassadors were, too.

To them, living with "bugs" has for decades been a well-established and accepted way of life for diplomats sent into the Soviet bloc and many other countries.

"You assume a high degree of microphones" is the way former Central Intelligence Agency director William E. Colby put it.

Suggestions that the United States close its Soviet operations are "damn foolish," said former Supreme Court justice Arthur Goldberg, who served as an ambassador-at-large during the Carter administration. "You can operate, provided you take safeguards."

"The idea that you can't operate there is just nonsense," said Robert R. (Bobby) Inman, former head of the National Security Agency, deputy director of central intelligence and chairman of a panel that studied problems at the Moscow embassy in 1984.

Diplomats assigned to posts abroad, including some in countries assumed to be friendly to the United States, say that they long have operated under the assumption that many of their offices were bugged and that the foreign nationals working in U.S. missions—FSNs as they are called—are reporting to their local governments.

But this, say the diplomats, is hardly cause to abandon State Department operations in Soviet-bloc countries.

"What you have to understand is that a whole range of operations go on at our embassy that have nothing of a classified nature to them," said Greg Guroff, a United States Information Agency specialist who has been assigned to the Soviet Union "off and on for 20 years."

Rep. Daniel A. Mica (D-Fla.), who said the new U.S. Embassy in Moscow may have to be demolished because of the number of listening devices it contains, acknowleged in an interview that it may be unrealistic to hope to maintain an office building in the Soviet Union that is free of bugging devices.

"Most buildings could be penetrated," said Mica, head of the House Foreign Affairs' subcommittee on international operations. He said the United States needs a building in Moscow with "a minimum number of floors" free of bugs.

Bugging devices are hardly new in Soviet-bloc countries. During the Eisenhower administration, U.N. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge displayed a large hand-carved U.S. Seal—a gift of the Soviet Union—that had hung in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow from 1945 to 1952 and was found to contain listening devices.

A U.S. diplomat assigned to Romania in the 1960s once sent his shoes to be repaired. They came back with a radio transmitter in the heel, recalled Colby, who added of the inventor of the miniature device: "I'd like to give that man a medal."

When the United States first recognized the Soviet Union in 1934, the first American diplomats posted in Moscow assumed that the first Soviets who applied for jobs there "had come to us with the blessing of the Soviet authorities," according to the memoirs of the late Loy W. Henderson, a career diplomat.

Little has changed, according to Gerald Lamberty, a State Department economics officer and president of the American Foreign Service Association.

Lamberty, who recently served in Poland, said diplomats there assumed their drivers had contacts with the secret police "because they had access to goods not available to the general public" and that their maids were reporting as well.

"Sometimes they would come to us and ask for papers, just so they could give something to the secret police," he said. "So you'd give them something from The New York Times."

"There were jokes about so-and-so is the colonel" of the KGB secret police, recalled Thompson R. Buchanan, a retired Foreign Service officer who spent two tours in Moscow and one as the consul general in Leningrad.

It was not difficult to spot the senior KGB officer in the embassy, Buchanan said. "He was the one, perhaps cleaning the toilets, who everyone snapped to attention when he passed by."

Inman said it was well known in Moscow that "the woman who gave out the theater tickets and the woman who made airline tickets" worked for the KGB.

But for reasons of "efficiency" the embassy decided to keep them on, he said.

Learning what to say—and not to say—in bugged premises requires discipline, all of the diplomats said. "I operated under the assumption that everything is overheard—unless I am told otherwise," Guroff said.

"If you want to talk about something sensitive, you talk in the streets," Colby said. The reason is that traffic noises render most listening devices useless, he said.

Mica said his experience in Moscow suggests that the Soviets may have surpassed the Americans in bugging technology—an idea that James Bamford disputes.

"Both sides make essentially the same types of listening devices," said Bamford, author of the "Puzzle Palace," a book about the National Security Agency.

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None of the diplomats interviewed sought to minimize the potential damage allegedly caused by the Moscow Marine contingent, but one former intelligence expert, who asked not to be named, was philosophical about the Moscow incident and the outcries for new security rules.

"Really what we're dealing with is peaks and valleys," he said.

After every major security breach in the United States, the government will attempt to crack down on security violations, he said.

Over time the controls will grow lax and finally become sloppy. Then another breach and another crackdown. Why?

"That's the American way, peaks and valleys," the intelligence expert said.

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