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Espionage Lesson

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For the first time since his flight from Lebanon to Russia four years ago, Britain's Harold Philby has emerged from the Soviet dark and talked with Western newsmen in Moscow. What he had to say becomes him. Boastful, self-satisfied, unrepentant, arrogant and morally atrophied, he made clear both by his words and his bearing that he was, and still is, a super-traitor whose spying for the Kremlin did incalculable harm to his own country, to the United States and to the free world at large. And he is glad of it.

The Philby career began at Cambridge in 1933 when he became a Communist and a Soviet espionage agent. His rise in the British Secret Service was spectacular, as was the role he played here in Washington, from 1949 to 1951, as Britain's representative with ready access to American intelligence agencies—and to an appalling amount of the most highly classified information.

There were times when Philby almost got caught. Almost but not quite. In 1948, for instance, some of his colleagues had fleeting suspicions about his conduct in a cloak-and-dagger incident involving the death of a defecting Russian. Later,

in the course of his Washington assignment, the FBI and the CIA developed grave doubts about him, and they were certain in 1951 that he was the man who had tipped off his fellow-traitors, Burgess and Maclean, in time to enable them to escape from Britain to Russia. Still, despite this, he was left free to continue working for the Soviets in the "cover" job of foreign correspondent. Not until 1962 were the British ready to crack down on him—too late to prevent his flight to safe Soviet haven.

Certain questions nag the mind. How did this living lie manage to get away with his crime for so long? Why did the British and American espionage people fail to make swift and thorough tests of the validity of the suspicions they felt every now and then, from 1945 on? A fearful degree of official laxity and slipshod security seems to have been Philby's salvation.

We must hope the lesson has been learned. Memories of the excesses of McCarthyism should not inhibit in any way quiet, complete, systematic, continuous vigilance against treason such as Philby's. The threat is not imaginary. It can happen here.