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HOW THE GOVERNMENT TRIES TO AVOID HIRING SECURITY RISKS  
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Access to some of the nation's most sensitive secrets starts with Form 1879. [TEXT ILLEGIBLE] investigative Service in the Pentagon to trigger an investigation into this question: Can this person be trusted with the nation's secrets?

The process is coming under scrutiny - and already has come under criticism - as a result of the arrest of four men with ties to the Navy on charges of passing military secrets to the Soviet Union.

Particularly troubling is the fact that the spy ring apparently operated for at least 18 years. All four of the suspects had passed security checks - and two had been re-investigated and cleared again.

Three of them - John A. Walker Jr., his brother, Arthur, and his friend, Jerry A. Whitworth - had "top secret" clearances and the fourth, John's son, Michael, had access to "secret" information, permitting them to do what top Navy officials say is "very serious" damage to military secrets, particularly coded communications.

A military agency's request for a security clearance, the Form 1879, triggers an investigation intended to turn up any potential damaging material that could make a government employee vulnerable to blackmail, temptation or pressure, such as a history of money problems, excessive drinking, arrests or the use of drugs.

But those investigations may often miss important material because of their sheer number - more than 200,000 were requested last year alone - and because a conflicting maze of legal requirements blocks access to some important material.

"We need to improve our bureaucratic structure for investigations, there's no question about that," Rep. Les Aspin, D-Wis., and chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, said Wednesday.

Sen. Sam Nunn, D-Ga., one of the Senate's most respected military experts, said recently, "We should do a better job of clearing government and defense workers."

While the military security investigations sound complete, there are big gaps, according to critics like Nunn.

For example, Defense Investigative Service investigators have no direct access to the National Crime Information Computer, the centralized data bank which even local police agencies can tap into. If a person is convicted of a crime but that information is not sent to the FBI for some reason, it would not turn up in the "agency check," said investigative service officials.

The investigative service is barred from using the computer system because of privacy safeguards built in after civil libertarians raised fears about "Big Brother" federal dossiers when the system was created 19 years ago.

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