

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 23NEW YORK POST
15 July 1985**INSIDE WASHINGTON**

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Behind the big spy crackdown

THE Justice Dept. has 12 accused spies waiting to go on trial for espionage — an all-time record.

With the Navy family spy team and the CIA clerk and her Ghanian lover joining an FBI counterintelligence agent, two Russian emigres, and an Army intelligence agent in the slammer, the public is seeing the impressive results of a clear change in strategy by the Reagan administration from the way espionage cases were handled in the 1960s and '70s, say the experts.

During J. Edgar Hoover's heyday in the 1960s — when the CIA also had a major say in domestic investigations — people like CIA clerk Sharon Scrange or retired naval communications man John Walker would never have seen their names in headlines — much less be awaiting public trial.

In those days, they probably would have been taken to a "safe house" somewhere in rural Virginia for a less than peaceful debriefing session and then "turned" into working for the U.S. as double agents — feeding their Soviet or Ghanian controls carefully selected information sprinkled with a bit of disinformation.

But such clever deception is really the stuff of spy novels these days and rarely happens in actual practice.

Although somewhere in the vast and murky intelligence underworld, double agents still operate, that kind of chess game largely vanished during the spy scandals of the 1970s — when the old counter-intelligence bloodhounds like the CIA's James Angleton were purged after the discovery that these units had gone out of control.

The Justice Dept., starting with Jimmy Carter's Attorney General Griffin Bell, responded to the spy scandals by reining in the counter-intelligence units and using the law against both hunters and hunted.

Bell won spy battles with the CIA over the prosecution of Vietnamese agent David Troung and others.

But at the same time the government's ability to prosecute spies — pouring into the nation under diplomatic cover as a result of the government's policy of opening its doors to the Soviet Union — was severely damaged.

The picture changed when President Reagan came into office in 1981 and redirected the force of the law so that it was aimed only at the traitors — not those trying to put them behind bars.

With the firm support of CIA Director William Casey and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, his Justice Dept. made fighting Soviet intelligence operations a major priority. He approved beefing up the counter-intelligence sections as well as modifying some of the laws imposed during the 1970s that had restricted the ability of counter-intelligence to operate.

Although law enforcement and intelligence experts say they have a long way to go before they will be able to restrict Soviet intelligence operations effectively in this country, the number of spectacular cases made in the past two years should come as no surprise to anyone.

Intelligence experts note that they have learned a considerable amount about how the KGB and its sister services operate in this country from investigating the 12 spies — as well as from two recent Soviet bloc defectors.

The conclusion of the experts is that there is just as much to gain from prosecuting intelligence agents as there is from playing games with double and triple agents. And the propoganda value of the recent cases is an additional and unexpected prize.