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IN A SATELLITE AGE, GUMSHOE SPYING DID THE TRICK  
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WASHINGTON

Among the shopping bag full of papers the FBI says John A. Walker Jr. left at a drop site last month was a letter to his Soviet contact on a problem they faced.

Its contents suggest that for all that the world of spying has learned about using technology over manpower, Walker's ring was a gumshoe operation that echoed the '50s, not the '80s.

His letter said the bulk of documents - more than 120 in that bag - was getting cumbersome and that photographing them might be the answer.

"I have a Super 8 mm movie camera which is capable of single-frame shots," the letter said. "I have enclosed a short sample of a document shot with a camera using different focusing methods ... They don't look very good to me, but I thought you may have an idea on how we could make this method work."

Found on a shelf in Walker's Norfolk, Va., detective-agency office, according to FBI evidence logs, was a focal-brand Super 8 mm movie camera. With it was a repair order from K-Mart.

In an age of computer chips, microdots and floppy discs, a discount store movie camera is a step back for international espionage. But for all Walker's love of gadgetry, airplanes and boats, his wasn't a high-tech network.

The government's failure to detect the Walker operation for 18 years or more provokes Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, D-Vt., vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Operation of the ring for so long without detection would be more understandable, Leahy said, "if this was the result of some remarkable new technology."

"But the negligence involved in this is neither understandable nor excusable. There's nobody in the Department of Defense who hasn't gotten up and given speeches about techniques of the Soviet Union - the exact techniques taken here," he said.

More sophisticated miniature photography than Walker used was used 30 years ago, when Rudolf Abel was convicted of espionage for the Soviets. He stored his film in hollowed-out coins.

More recently, East German physicist Alfred Zehe was charged with espionage in 1983 after giving a Navy man feigning cooperation a special camera for copying documents. It was capable of taking as many as 2,600 still photos on one film cassette. Zehe was among those swapped for prisoners held in the East last week.

Technological devices, like eye-in-the-sky satellites and super-snooping by electronic eavesdropping, play a big role in modern-day intelligence gathering. And U.S. officials say a constant worry is keeping high-technology developments and new computer hardware out of Soviet hands.

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But this case, intelligence experts say, is a strong reminder that the Soviet Union and its KGB still rely on the tried-and-true tradecraft of espionage: using people to gain military secrets.

"That's really the tragedy of this case," said Leahy. "We're not seeing anything different. We're seeing a repeat of things that we knew. It appears to me a lot of people didn't take those things seriously enough. People knew better."

Besides John Walker, the alleged mastermind, also charged with selling Navy secrets to the Soviet Union are his son Michael L. Walker, his brother Arthur J. Walker, and friend Jerry A. Whitworth.

All have Navy ties, with service in sensitive communications positions or on carriers and submarines.

FBI documents say John Walker began his spying as long ago as 1965.

U.S. officials often complain of the large number of Soviets assumed to be KGB agents, operating out of Soviet embassies and consuls here. Leahy contends there are more than 1,000 Soviet agents. Some estimate one third or more of the official Soviets here are spies.

In the Walker case, Leahy said, "just the basic steps weren't taken" by U.S. counterintelligence.

Retired Adm. Bobby Inman, former deputy director of the CIA, says the Walker case is remarkable for the number of people involved and for its longevity.

"What this case demonstrates is how valuable the human element is," Inman said in an interview.

Another intelligence expert, speaking only on condition he not be identified, called the Walker case "straightforward espionage." The "dead drop" of the shopping bag of documents was decades-old Soviet tradecraft, as was Walker's trips to Hong Kong and elsewhere to make contacts.

"It's a typical case writ large," this official said.

Retired CIA official John J. Greaney, now head of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers, said evidence suggests the Walker case, while perhaps damaging, was unsophisticated by modern spy standards.

"Elements of it from a tradecraft position would really indicate a pretty low-level operation," he said.

Said the other intelligence expert: "As far as counterintelligence goes, absolutely routine. Banal even."

Greaney says the larger counterintelligence concern is the loss of technology, not only through spies but other means, including Soviets allowed to do graduate study in the United States.

Human intelligence vs. technological collection means is a familiar debate in intelligence circles. Most say a balance is needed, but what that means is open to question.

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"People got too carried away with the whiz-bang of satellites," Leahy said. "All of it is important. The fact is you have to put a great deal into human intelligence and it takes a long time to pay off."

The Soviets, these experts say, are willing to take their time.

"The Soviets are just without parallel as far as an appetite for information," Greaney said. "They are like a vacuum cleaner. They will take anything they can get their hands on."

The problem for America, of course, is that an open and free society makes spying a more easy task. Spying in a closed society such as the Soviet Union - in "denied areas," the spymasters call it - is much more difficult.

"We have to admit we are a free society and the price we pay for a free society is you have ... traitors who will sell the country out," Greaney said. "It is difficult to equate our collection of intelligence with the Soviets because our problem is much more difficult."