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Amnesty for spies

There's ample evidence Soviet-paid spies are operating in the U.S.: The former CIA man who abruptly vanished. The FBI agent on trial for spying in California. The Walker family espionage ring.

Authorities are searching for new and better ways to improve national security. There's particular emphasis on American citizens engaged in espionage, as opposed to foreigners operating under diplomatic cover.

A former intelligence official, Alexander Jason, has a new and promising idea. It's so novel it just might work. In any event, it's worthy of consideration.

Jason proposes that the U.S. declare, and then actively advertise, a 90-day amnesty period for spies. Spies would be promised immunity from prosecution in return for coming forward and telling authorities who they are, just what they've done, and, importantly, with whom they worked. Members of the Walker ring considered turning themselves in but were, for obvious reasons, afraid to do so. If not for the anger of John Walker's estranged wife, that ring might still be operating.

An amnesty would give individual spies a way out. It would also cause them to think about turning themselves in before being fingered by a confederate. Confessed spies would lead authorities to others. The Soviets would be cast into considerable confusion, knowing that some of their agents had gone over the wall but not sure who.

There would, of course, be one obvious drawback. The U.S. government would be allowing citizens guilty of one of the most serious crimes imaginable to get off scot free. But even now some spies are caught but deliberately not prosecuted to keep Moscow from knowing that an agent has been compromised.

The national security benefits of a public amnesty-for-spies program could outweigh the offense to justice. The Justice Department and the FBI would do well to give Jason's unusual proposal very serious thought.

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