

Treason 101: Insider Threat

The Insider Espionage Threat

By: Richards J. Heuer, Jr.

DSS/Security Research Center

To borrow a phrase from the former comic strip character, Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." The initiative for most insider espionage comes from the insider, not from the foreign organization or group that receives the information. The overwhelming majority (about 75%) of Americans arrested for espionage during the past 20 years, and who had security clearance, were either volunteers who took the initiative in contacting a foreign intelligence service or were recruited by a close American friend who had volunteered to a foreign intelligence service.

The initiative came from the foreign service in a comparatively small minority of the cases. It is difficult for foreign buyers of information to locate a willing American seller. They must proceed in secret, and with great care to avoid being caught, to identify one of the very few cleared Americans willing to betray their country.

It is easier for an American seeking to sell information to find a foreign buyer, although that, too, involves great risk. Twenty-six percent of the Americans arrested for espionage or attempted espionage during the past 20 years were caught by counterintelligence operations before they ever succeeded in compromising classified information, and 47% were caught during their first year of betrayal.

Risk of betrayal of trust does not depend upon the presence of an implacable foreign adversary. It depends only upon an insider with the opportunity to betray, some combination of character weaknesses and situational stresses, and a trigger that sets the betrayal in motion. Common weaknesses include an arrogant attitude that the rules apply only to others, greed, impulsiveness, narcissism, feelings of entitlement, vindictiveness, alienation, paranoia, naiveté, and sensation-seeking.

There is reason to suspect that the number of insider spies today may be higher than in the past. One cannot know how many undiscovered spies are currently active or what the future will bring. Nevertheless, we are not entirely in the dark when assessing the risk of undiscovered espionage. One can draw inferences from changes in American society and the international environment that may increase or decrease the propensity of cleared personnel to betray the Government's trust.

Preconditions for Insider Betrayal

As a general rule, four conditions must be present before a disaffected or troubled employee commits a serious betrayal of trust like espionage. The same conditions also apply to other insider crimes like embezzlement, sabotage, and procurement fraud, but those offenses are not discussed here. The four necessary preconditions for espionage are:

- An opportunity to commit the crime.
- A motive or need to be satisfied through the crime.
- An ability to overcome natural inhibitions to criminal behavior, such as moral values, loyalty to employer or co-workers, or fear of being caught.
- A trigger that sets the betrayal in motion.

The prevalence of these four conditions is influenced by changes in social and economic conditions in the United States and in our relations with the rest of the world. If the prevalence of these preconditions for espionage is increasing, the prevalence of insider betrayal may also be increasing. Analysis of changes in these preconditions for espionage gives some insight into what might be happening behind the scenes, without our knowledge, with respect to foreign espionage in the United States.

Opportunity

Opportunity is of two types:

- Access to information or materiel that can be exchanged for money or used to achieve some other goal.
- Personal acquaintance with, or easy access to, persons expected to be interested in obtaining such valuable information or materiel.



Starting with the widespread use of the Xerox copier in the 1950s, technological advances have made it increasingly difficult to control the distribution of sensitive information. Today's large, automated databases and interconnected networks increase exponentially the amount of information that can be collected and compromised by a single, well-placed spy. Computer databases have greatly eased the spy's age-old problem -- how to purloin the exact information his or her foreign contact wants.

Opportunity equals temptation. It is now possible to commit crimes while sitting at one's computer engaged in what appears to casual observers as normal activity. More people have more access to more sensitive information than ever before. Like bank employees handling currency worth many thousands of dollars, not everyone is cut out to deal with that degree of temptation.

In today's increasingly open and interconnected world, it is also easier than in the past for an interested seller of information or materiel to find a foreign buyer. As compared with the Cold War days, there are many more countries to which a seller of information can turn in search of a buyer, but the risks are still great. In June 1996, the FBI had 800 open investigations of economic espionage involving 23 different countries.³

It is also dramatically easier for foreign intelligence services to take the initiative to spot, assess, and recruit knowledgeable Americans with exploitable weaknesses. The greatest change is in industry, where personnel involved in sensitive military R&D and production are increasingly in official business contact with their counterparts in foreign countries that are conducting espionage against the United States. The line between military and non-military, and between classified technology and unclassified technology sold to foreign countries, is increasingly blurred.

Motive

When considering motives for espionage, it is useful to remember that the real motive may be different from the surface appearance. Although financial motivation is important, many people who commit espionage for money have more pressing emotional needs than financial needs. Espionage cases that appear to be financially motivated may actually be motivated by out-of-control emotional needs. Money is valued not just for what it buys, but even more for what it symbolizes -- success, power, influence and a route to happiness and self-esteem.

Espionage may also be an expression of power to influence events (satisfy a frustrated sense of self-importance), an outlet for anger (restore damaged self-image by outsmarting or punishing the bosses who failed to recognize one's talents), a means of revenge, or a source of excitement. It may also be motivated by divided loyalties or by an arrogant belief that one knows better than the U.S. Government what is in the best interests of the United States.

When looking at how social and economic changes in recent years affect motivation for espionage, two things stand out:

- Downsizing, outsourcing, transfer of jobs overseas, restructuring to adapt to the pressures of global economic competition, rapid technological change, and increased hiring of part-time workers to avoid paying benefits are all eroding many employees' sense of job security and loyalty to employer. At a minimum, this reduces the extent to which loyalty to employer inhibits misconduct. At worst, it provides a motive or rationalization for betrayal.
- About half of all the doctoral degrees in physics, chemistry and computer science granted by U.S. universities now go to foreign-born students.⁴ One-third of all the engineers in Silicon Valley were foreign born.⁵ This increasing internationalization of many high technology fields, combined with the increased number and variety of countries conducting intelligence operations against the United States, may increase the prevalence of conflicting loyalties.

Reduced Inhibitions

Most personnel with access to classified information have the opportunity to betray, and many have a financial or other personal motive to do so. Betrayal is so rare only because it is deterred by basic moral values; loyalty to country, employer, or co-workers; and/or

fear of being caught. Moral values, loyalty, and fear are the bedrock on which security is built. The stigma commonly associated with betraying one's country also plays a role. Any social changes that erode these inhibitions to betrayal are likely to increase its frequency.

Morality is difficult to define and even more difficult to measure. This is not an appropriate place to pass judgment on the moral fiber of current American society from which our cleared personnel are drawn. Suffice it to note that the debate seems to be between those who see a serious degradation of moral values and others who view the state of morality in America as no worse than at other times in our history.

As noted under motives, loyalty is adversely affected by economic changes that devalue the long-term employer-employee relationship. Perceived inequities cause resentment. Feelings of entitlement to better treatment may be used to rationalize illegal behavior or may reduce inhibitions that otherwise deter illegal behavior. When people feel betrayed by their employer, it is easier for them to betray in return. Common rationalizations include: "I'm only getting back what they owe me." "It's their fault. They deserve it, because if they hadn't screwed me, I wouldn't be doing this."

The stigma of potentially being branded a traitor, or thinking of oneself as a traitor, also inhibits betrayal. This is somewhat diminished since termination of the Cold War ended the national "mission" to fight Communism and relieved the threat of nuclear holocaust. It is easier today for potential spies to rationalize the sale of classified information as a "purely business proposition" rather than a heinous activity that puts survival of country at risk. This is especially true when selling information to a "friendly" country or giving away information to a friendly country one wants to help.

The post-Cold War emergence of "friendly" countries as significant intelligence threats increases the prevalence of conflicting loyalties.

Although many people are honest because it's the right thing to do, others obey the law for fear of being caught. Fear of the unknown and fear of being caught are significant inhibitions to espionage, for the risk is indeed very high. There is no reason to believe that either fear has changed much in recent years.

Triggers

Serious personal problems may fester indefinitely without leading to misconduct. The decision to betray will usually be triggered by some event in the individual's personal or professional life that pushes stress beyond that person's breaking point. The triggering event may be quite different from the underlying causes and motivation for betrayal.

Many people, perhaps most people, experience some form of stress that threatens their self-image at some time in their lives. They face serious financial problems combined with an available opportunity for illegal gain; failure to compete effectively with their

peers; perceived injustice at the hands of an employer or supervisor; termination from a job under circumstances that prompt resentment; rejection or betrayal by a spouse or other close family member.

Emotionally stable and well adjusted individuals generally react to these experiences in positive ways—by learning from them, adjusting their expectations, working harder, or simply maintaining a stiff upper lip. Less stable or already troubled individuals sometimes react in ways that harm themselves or the organization. They may compound their problems by becoming less productive at work, turning to substance abuse or promiscuity, or attempting suicide. Or they may harm the organization by actions that range from absenteeism to self-serving decisions, theft, fraud, sabotage, or espionage.

There is no reason to believe the amount of stress in the lives of people in general is increasing. But many individuals do experience sharp changes in the amount of stress in their lives. The point is that stressful events are quite common, and that when they occur they can tip an otherwise weak, susceptible, or disturbed person over the edge.

Summary and Conclusions

The world is in the midst of an information revolution that many believe will have as far reaching an impact on politics, economics, and culture as that of the industrial revolution. It is surely affecting the manner in which nation states and other international actors compete economically as well as militarily, including the role of espionage in international competition and conflict. As a result of changes that have already occurred in the domestic and international environment, the prevalence of insider betrayal may be greater today than during the Cold War.

Developments in information technology make it much harder to control the distribution of information. This greatly increases opportunities for espionage and the amount of damage that can be done by a single insider. A more open and interconnected world makes it easier for those interested in selling information to establish contact with willing buyers, as well as for those interested in buying information to spot, assess, and recruit willing sellers. Because U.S. national survival is no longer at stake since the end of the Cold War, personal interests are more likely than before to take precedence over national interests. It is easier to rationalize the sale of information to a "friendly" country as a "purely business proposition," rather than a heinous activity that puts survival of country at risk.

These social, economic and international trends may be creating uniquely fertile ground for the incubation and growth of espionage. They may infuse new vigor and intensity into the world's "second oldest profession," with the United States as the principal target.

References

1. See [Espionage by the Numbers](#). Information is from an unclassified database maintained by DSS/Security Research Center. For information on this database,

- see S. Wood & M. Wiskoff, Americans Who Spied Against their Country Since World War II. (Monterey, CA: Defense Personnel Security Research Center, 1992).
2. Ibid.
 3. Geide, Kenneth (1996). Economic Espionage: Looking Ahead. In Sarbin, Theodore (ed.), Vision 2021: Security Issues for the Next Quarter Century. Proceedings of conference sponsored by Defense Personnel Security Research Center and Security Policy Board Staff, June 25-25, 1996. Monterey, CA: Defense Personnel Security Research Center.
 4. National Academy of Sciences (1995). Reshaping the Graduate Education of Scientists and Engineers. National Academy Press, p. 70.
 5. Gilder, George (1995, Dec. 18) Geniuses from Abroad, Wall Street Journal.