

Treason 101: How Spies Are Caught

Treason is a high-risk criminal offense. The traitor must fear arrest for the rest of his or her life, as the statute of limitations does not apply to espionage. For example, former National Security Agency (NSA) employee Robert Lipka was arrested in 1996 -- a full 30 years after he left NSA and 22 years after his last contact with Soviet intelligence.

There are four principal ways by which spies are detected:

- Reporting by U.S. sources within the foreign intelligence service.
- Routine counterintelligence monitoring.
- Tip from a friend or spouse.
- Their own mistakes.

U.S. Sources Within the Foreign Intelligence Service

Of the Americans who held a security clearance and have been arrested for espionage, about half were caught as a result of information provided by a defector from the foreign intelligence service, or a penetration agent or friend within the foreign service that the spy was working for. People who betrayed their country often have little fear of being caught, because they think they are smarter than everyone else. They think they can easily get away with it. Ironically, even if they actually were smarter, it would not help them. No matter how smart or clever a spy may be, he or she has no protection against U.S. Government sources within the other intelligence service.

Routine Counterintelligence Monitoring

If the spy is not reported by sources within the other intelligence service, there is a strong likelihood of detection through routine counterintelligence operations. Of the cleared Americans arrested for espionage or attempted espionage during the past 20 years, 26% were arrested before they could do any damage and 47% were caught during their first year of betrayal. This is not surprising, as counterintelligence knows so many of the foreign intelligence officers active in the United States. It knows where they work, where they live, where they hang out, and how they ply their trade. Any would-be spy who doesn't know how the counterintelligence system works is likely to be caught in the counterintelligence web.

Changes in Behavior

Espionage usually requires keeping or preparing materials at home, traveling to signal sites or secret meetings at unusual times and places, change in one's financial status with no corresponding change in job income, and periods of high stress that affects behavior. All of these changes in normal pattern of behavior often come to the attention of other people and must be explained. Other people become suspicious and pass their suspicions on to others.

Spying is a lonely business. To explain these changes in behavior, or out of a need to confide in someone else, spies often confide in a spouse or try to enlist the help of a friend. The friend or spouse in whom the spy confides often does not remain a friend or loyal spouse after he or she realizes what is going on.

A person who helps stop espionage is eligible for a reward of up to \$500,000.
(See the FBI page on Related Links)

Irrational Behavior

Most people who betray their country are not thinking rationally, or they would not be involved in such a self-destructive activity. They are driven, in large part, by irrational emotional needs to feel important, successful, powerful or to get even. These emotional needs are out of control, so the same emotional needs that lead them to betray also cause them to flaunt their sudden affluence or to brag about their involvement in some mysterious activity. Because they are so mixed up psychologically, they make mistakes that get them caught.

Since the spy, like many other criminals, is more prone to stress and the observable traits related to it than the average person, it has frequently proven difficult for some spies to maintain stable relationships with others. And, when relationships dissolve, whether it involves love, spying, or simple friendship, one of the parties may be left with feelings of vindictiveness and even an urge to get even. These feelings can be carried out by revealing the espionage activities to authorities as an anonymous tip. If the person was not an active participant in the espionage activity, they may even contact authorities directly and testify about the espionage. Either way, it's just another way the spy can not get away.

Betrayal by Accomplices or Family

Someone usually knows or suspects that an individual is or was conducting espionage. Often, those who are aware of the espionage activity are also active participants that actually are involved in obtaining or copying the classified material. Sometimes they are more passive actors, perhaps family members, that only accompany the spy while passing the classified material to an agent of a foreign intelligence service through a "dead-drop" or some other spy tradecraft.