

Radio Address to the Nation on Efforts to Prevent Espionage Against the United States

November 30, 1985

My fellow Americans:

You've heard me say that nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. Well, today I wish to speak to you about a struggle which we do wage every day, a struggle we must win if we're to protect our freedom and our way of life. At stake are government secrets essential to our national security. Protecting these secrets against espionage and any hostile intelligence threat to the United States is a heavy responsibility.

Operations to protect America's secrets are usually done quietly with little publicity. Well, lately they've been making big news. Some of you may be wondering if the large number of spy arrests in recent weeks means that we're looking harder or whether there are more spies to find. Well, I think the answer to both questions is yes. The threat is certainly increasing. The number of hostile intelligence officers in the United States and working against us around the world has grown sharply in recent years. Espionage, spying, is not a game. It costs our country secrets and millions of dollars in stolen technology. It can also cost lives and threaten our national survival.

This administration had given high priority to improving our ability to detect and counter any hostile intelligence threat. We've added resources, people, and top-level attention to this task. We will not hesitate to root out and prosecute the spies of any nation. We'll let the chips fall where they may. And we've had impressive results. From 1975 to 1980, the United States apprehended a total of 13 spies. From 1981 through this year, we've apprehended 34. Here, let me add a word of appreciation in particular to the men and women of the FBI who have been working so diligently on this vital and sometimes thankless task.

In the past, we've had some difficulty in readily admitting the intensity of this threat. Today, however, we approach the intelligence threat with a new degree of realism. We recognize that the KGB and others seeking to exploit the openness of our society are not 10 feet tall; neither, however, are they midgets. We're up against aggressive people who take their job seriously. There's no reason to sugar-coat reality. The free world is today confronted with some of the most sophisticated, best orchestrated efforts of theft and espionage in modern history. Today the Soviet intelligence services and secret police, the KGB and the GRU, and their surrogate services among the Soviet-bloc countries—Czechoslovakia, Poland, East Germany, Bulgaria, Cuba, and others—are hard at work. Their activities include classical espionage and what they call active measures. They are employing all the means we associate with spies, including electronic espionage against sensitive communications and other sophisticated techniques, to steal our secrets and technology.

As events of recent days have made clear, many nations spy on the United States. The totality of this threat underscores just how important it is that we protect ourselves. What better time than this Thanksgiving weekend to remember and give thanks that we live in the freest land God has placed on this Earth. Yet even with our freedom, we must have the ability to protect certain vital secrets. So much depends on this: our diplomatic efforts to advance liberty and preserve peace, our own ability to see and hear what is going on in the world, and the readiness of our military forces and their effectiveness in carrying out their mission anywhere in the world.

While our security is tied to protecting certain secrets, there is no need to fight repression by becoming repressive ourselves. Understanding the problem is the first step. The arrests we are seeing now should alert us to the danger we face. Even skeptics should recognize how necessary it is to maintain our top-quality counterintelligence efforts. At the same time, we can learn through each espionage case how to prevent these spies and turncoats from hurting us. In 1981 we began a comprehensive review of counterintelligence, security, and countermeasures. While much has been done, culminating in additional arrests, there is more we can and must do.

We are currently seeking a broad range of reforms and improvements, including reducing the size of the hostile intelligence threat within our borders, better monitoring of exchange programs, improving government communications and personnel procedures, better analysis, expanding counterintelligence capabilities abroad, and ensuring the security of U.S. Embassies and bases throughout the world. We are working closely with the Congress in addressing many of these needs. I am asking for your understanding and support as we move ahead together to win this struggle and keep America free, secure, and at peace.

Until next week, thanks for listening, and God bless you.

Note: The President spoke at 9:06 a.m. from Rancho del Cielo, his ranch near Santa Barbara, CA.

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