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New Book Unmasks Scientist X as Spy, But Facts of Case Tell a Different Story

To the accused, it was an “astonishing” allegation. Chapter 29, the next to the last one of *“Every Man Should Try”: Adventures of a Public Interest Activist* (Public Affairs, 1999), by Jeremy J. Stone, president of the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) for the past 26 years, centers on a figure referred to only as Scientist X. Stone purports in his book that X had been recruited during World War II to pass information to Soviet agents on the design and construction of the atomic bombs then under development at Los Alamos. Though X isn’t named in the chapter, Stone drops several hints that enabled some scientists and scholars to unmask the suspect to reveal one of the nation’s most revered physicists: Philip Morrison, university professor emeritus at MIT, a public television guru, and a book review editor at *Scientific American*.

Criticism of Stone was immediate and scathing. Stone’s accusation is “unsubstantiated” and “unbelievable,” contends Priscilla McMillan, a history professor at Harvard University’s Russian Research Center and secretary of FAS. “It is simply outrageous.”

Ever since the book was published in April, FAS officers and council members have been discussing by telephone and e-mail how to sustain Morrison’s prestige as a statesman of science and yet preserve Stone’s reputation as a focused and driven activist. “Jeremy’s actions for the FAS have been on a grand world scale,” says Frank Von Hippel, a Princeton University physicist who chairs the FAS Fund, the research and education foundation of the organization. Stone, son of the crusading independent journalist I. F. Stone, has championed nuclear disarmament, freedom for Andrei Sakharov, and US diplomatic exchanges with the Soviet Union and Peoples’ Republic of China, among other causes. “The accusation of spying against Phil is Jeremy’s grand error of judgment. It’s an aberration,” says Von Hippel, “and none of us can account for it. In the end, though, Phil is unscathed by this.”

Because FAS was founded in 1945 mainly by physicists who had created atomic bombs, Stone had been intrigued by a bizarre account of Soviet infiltration of the Manhattan Project in a book by Pavel Sudoplatov, a Stalin

era spymaster, written with Jerold L. Schecter, a former Moscow bureau chief for *Time*, and his wife, Leona. Sudoplatov claimed in his book, *Special Tasks* (Little, Brown, 1994), that he had “set up a network of agents who convinced Robert Oppenheimer, Enrico Fermi, Leo Szilard, Bruno Pontecorvo, Alan Nunn May, Klaus Fuchs, and other scientists in America and Great Britain to share atomic secrets with



MORRISON: Mistaken identity.

us.” Physicists and historians quickly ridiculed the charge against the first three on the list, though by mingling their names with those of Pontecorvo, Nunn May, and Fuchs, Sudoplatov made it appear that all were passing bomb data to the Soviet Union. (See *PHYSICS TODAY*, June 1994, page 59.)

Soon after the book was published, Morrison, it so happened, made a careful analysis of Sudoplatov’s sources. He concluded that it was most likely that the Soviet’s principal mole was an experienced agent with contacts among Metallurgical Lab employees in Chicago, but not a knowledgeable physicist. The documents dated 1944 were filled with false trails and offbeat ideas, Morrison found, but those in 1945 were much more accurate though mainly nontechnical.

Later in 1994, the National Security Agency began releasing transcripts of Soviet intelligence messages that were intercepted during and after World War II. The transcripts, known by the

code name Venona, referred to agents and moles by various cover names, such as Pers, Mlad, Huron, Quantum, and Volok. Mlad has since been identified as Theodore Hall, an American physicist at Los Alamos, who was recruited by the Soviets when he was 19 and moved to Britain when he believed he might be prosecuted. Huron is suspected to have been Pontecorvo, who worked with Fermi in Rome and Los Alamos, defected to the Soviet Union in 1950, and died in 1993.

Stone found an account of a mole code-named Perseus (who is thought to be Pers, possibly another lone spy, a mosaic of several spies, or even a myth) in two articles by Colonel Vladimir Chikov, a KGB public relations official, which had been translated into English for *New Times*, a popular magazine published in Moscow. In his book, Stone describes Chikov’s story as a “puff piece” whose “obvious purpose was to show that the KGB—not the Soviet atomic scientists—had been the one who should get the credit for the Soviet atomic bomb.” Even so, Stone accepts Chikov’s account of how Perseus was recruited and finds that the statements attributed to Perseus sound like those Scientist X would have voiced. Stone was fairly certain that X was really his old friend Morrison, even though, as Stone acknowledges, the quote had been translated from English to Russian and back again, then edited.

Stone also recalled that as a young man in the 1930s, Morrison, like many intellectuals during the Depression, had belonged to the American Communist Party. Morrison had received his PhD from the University of California at Berkeley in 1940 under the supervision of Oppenheimer, who had also flirted with Communism at the time. At Los Alamos, Morrison had an office next to General Leslie R. Groves, who managed the bomb program, a location that would have enabled Groves to keep an eye on a left-wing ideologue like Morrison, Stone figured. Nonetheless, Morrison was in charge of, among other things, delivering the plutonium core of the first atomic bomb to the Trinity test site in the New Mexico desert and then to the island of Tinian for the raid on Hiroshima. More significantly, Morrison had helped evalu-

ate German intelligence for Groves and so, in Stone's view, would have known that German scientists were getting nowhere with their bomb project. Chikov had written that at the time Perseus was recruited he had said that Manhattan Project scientists had been tricked into working on the bomb when Groves and others knew the Nazis were lagging far behind. This may have been the motive for Morrison's actions, Stone thought.

Clutching a hunch that Morrison was Pers, Stone called on Morrison twice in 1994, never accusing him of spying, but sounding him out about Chikov's account and suggesting that those who participated in wartime espionage should now come forward and explain their motives for the sake of history. It became clear to Morrison and his wife what Stone was proposing and led, Morrison said in a telephone interview, to "five years of estrangement."

Chapter 29 in Stone's book surprised Morrison nevertheless. "I was incredulous and distressed," said Morrison. His written response to the chapter was circulated to FAS officers and others.

In it, Morrison discusses the "obvious discrepancies" between Perseus as described by Chikov and his own life. Chikov stated that Perseus was recruited by the KGB during a visit to his ailing parents in New York City in 1943. But Morrison's parents lived in Philadelphia at the time. Chikov wrote that Perseus had fought with the International Brigades during the Civil War in Spain, though Morrison didn't set foot in Spain before the 1980s and hadn't crossed the Atlantic at all before 1959. "I was never plausible infantry material among the volunteers who sought service in Spain, since I walked with a strong limp and a cane, the residue of polio in 1917 or 1918, symptoms still with me," says Morrison, who is now 83 and more or less housebound.

Morrison argues that he does not fit Chikov's tale "objectively or subjectively, and what I assert is provable by public record." Now that he has been "erroneously" identified as Perseus and Scientist X, Morrison hoped that Stone would apologize. "We will both be healed by the truth," said Morrison. "I remain loyal to the letter and the spirit

of my commitment to atomic secrecy, and I have never breached the trust that my colleagues, my employers, and my country placed in me."

In response to a letter that Morrison sent to Stone on 10 May, setting out the differences between his life and the events cited by Chikov, Stone replied a week later: "In the light of these facts, which I certainly cannot contradict, I can only accept your denial that you are not Perseus." Urged by FAS council members to send a more personal apology to Morrison, Stone wrote on 5 June that he had "accepted your denial that you are Perseus. The question has arisen . . . whether I believe that you might be some other spy by some other name. I do not. I want to apologize to you for the unfavorable publicity, which raised unfortunate questions of your innocence. . . . I have always admired you and remember, with great warmth, the many kindnesses you showed me during your three-year chairmanship of FAS. I do regret that this affair has estranged us for so long and caused you the pain and concern that I know it must have."

IRWIN GOODWIN

Spallation Neutron Source Restored to Life in House, Raising Hopes for Starting Construction in 2000

As baseball's positivist philosopher Yogi Berra was fond of saying, "It ain't over till it's over." That epigram seems apt in chronicling the saga of the Spallation Neutron Source as it winds its way through the budget maze for fiscal 2000, which begins on 1 October. The largest new science project in the budget, the \$1.36 billion SNS wasn't considered a shoo-in when the Department of Energy listed it among the highlights of the millennial year. DOE asked Congress to allocate \$214 million for the project in a budget with tight spending caps and in competition with other programs that are certain to be shortchanged next year. So when F. James Sensenbrenner Jr, a frugal Republican of Wisconsin and the House Science Committee's chairman, announced that he liked the SNS but would withhold all funds for its construction until DOE met his list of conditions about its technical staff, building schedule, and other matters, the machine's future seemed bleak (see PHYSICS TODAY, June, page 49).

True to his word, Sensenbrenner introduced DOE's Research, Development, and Demonstration Authorization Act of 1999 (H.R. 1655) with only \$17.9 million for the SNS—all for continued research and design and none for construction. Money that might oth-

erwise have been directed to begin building the SNS was shifted to other programs in DOE's science office, particularly biological and environmental projects and fusion energy research.

The science committee's discussion of the bill on 25 May resembled a nursery school food fight—though there was much more at stake than jelly beans and oatmeal cookies. First off, Jerry Costello, an Illinois Democrat, offered an amendment that would have allowed SNS construction funds, though scaled down to \$150 million, \$46.1 million below DOE's request. Sensenbrenner's bill, Costello argued, "would effectively pull the plug on the nation's number one science project." The amendment included spending cuts in DOE science programs to offset the SNS construction costs. But Sensenbrenner objected that the offsets proposed by Costello totaled only \$90 million—\$40 million in fiscal 2000 and \$50 million in fiscal 2001. Sensenbrenner then reiterated all the problems he had reported to the committee in March, after he had visited Oak Ridge National Laboratory, where the machine is to be located, and interrogated David Moncton, a condensed matter physicist at Argonne National Laboratory who was recruited to manage the SNS. While he endorsed the project

and considered Moncton more than equal to the job, Sensenbrenner said he wanted DOE to provide better answers to his questions lest "taxpayers are left holding the bill," citing for emphasis the debacle of the Superconducting Super Collider.

Joe Barton, a Republican, whose Texas district was the site for the SSC, expressed his disapproval of Sensenbrenner's position. "This committee has an obligation to fund basic research," said Barton, "and this project is basic research." If the chairman is unhappy with the management at DOE, that "should not be the reason to derail the SNS," he added. "Let's reform DOE, but don't kill the project to improve the department."

Into the fray came another Republican, Vern Ehlers of Michigan, the committee's vice chairman, who voiced concern that the SNS had become a partisan issue, even though both sides approved the project. He was satisfied with Sensenbrenner's review of the project's problems, though he appeared to regret the chairman's strong opposition to funding its construction until DOE resolved all the problems. Still, it was Sensenbrenner who "took it upon himself" to pay his own way to CERN in Switzerland "to negotiate a better agreement" for America's parti-