

TRIBUNE INVESTIGATION

Internet blows CIA cover

It's easy to track America's covert operatives. All you need to know is how to navigate the Internet.

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But an online search for the term "Camp Peary" produced the names and other details of 26 individuals who according to the data are employed there. Searching aviation databases for flights landing or taking off from Camp Peary's small airstrip revealed 17 aircraft whose ownership and flight histories could also be traced.

Although the Tribune's initial search for "Central Intelligence Agency" employees turned up only work-related addresses and phone numbers, other Internet-based services provide, usually for a fee but sometimes for free, the home addresses and telephone numbers of U.S. residents, as well as satellite photographs of the locations where they live and work.

Asked how so many personal details of CIA employees had found their way into the public domain, the senior U.S. intelligence official replied that "I don't have a great explanation, quite frankly."

The official noted, however, that the CIA's credo has always been that "individuals are the first person responsible for their cover. If they can't keep their cover, then it's hard for anyone else to keep it. If someone filled out a credit report and put that down, that's just stupid."

One senior U.S. official used a barnyard epithet to describe the agency's traditional system of providing many of its foreign operatives with easily decipherable covers that include little more than a post office box for an address and a non-existent company as an employer.

Coverts especially important

And yet, experts say, covert operatives who pose as something other than diplomats are becoming increasingly important in the global war on terror.

"In certain areas you just can't collect the kind of information you need in the 21st Century by working out of the embassy. They're just not going to meet the kind of people they need to meet," said Melvin Goodman, who was a senior Soviet affairs analyst at the CIA for more than 20 years before he retired.

The problem, Goodman said, is that transforming a CIA officer who has worked under "diplomatic cover" into a "non-official cover" operator, or NOC--as was attempted with Valerie Plame--creates vulnerabilities that are not difficult to spot later on.

The CIA's challenge, in Goodman's view, is, "How do you establish a cover for them in a day and age when you can Google a name . . . and find out all sorts of holes?"

In Plame's case, online computer searches would have turned up her tenure as a junior diplomat in the U.S. Embassy in Athens even after she began passing herself off as a privately employed "energy consultant."

The solution, Goodman suggested, is to create NOCs at the very outset of their careers, "taking risks with younger people, worrying about the reputation of people before they have one. Or create one."

Shortage of `mentors'

But that approach also has a downside, in that "you're getting into the problem of very junior, inexperienced people, which a lot of veteran CIA people feel now is part of the problem. Porter Goss has to double the number of operational people in an environment where there are no mentors. Who's going to train these people?"

In addition to stepping up recruiting, Goss has ordered a "top-down" review of the agency's "tradecraft" following the disclosure that several supposedly covert operatives involved in the 2003 abduction of a radical Muslim preacher in Milan, Italy, had registered at hotels under their true names and committed other amateurish procedural violations that made it relatively easy for the Italian police to identify them and for Italian prosecutors to charge them with kidnapping.

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