

From

PATRIOT TO

TRAITOR

PSYCHIATRIST DAVID CHARNEY, MD '68,  
EXPLORES THE PSYCHOLOGY OF  
THE "INSIDER" SPY.

BY RENÉE GEARHART LEVY

**L**ast May, Ex-CIA officer Kevin Mallory was convicted of selling classified information to the Chinese government and sentenced to 20 years in prison. He became the third former U.S. intelligence official that year to plead guilty to espionage-related charges involving China, part of what officials call “an alarming trend.” At least 20 Americans have been arrested on charges of giving classified documents to foreign intelligence agencies over the past decade.

Almost like a story line out of the popular TV show “The Americans,” Mallory was contacted on LinkedIn by a Chinese recruiter he had mutual connections with, who said he worked for a Chinese think tank and was interested in his foreign policy experience. The man was actually

a Chinese intelligence officer to whom Mallory would ultimately sell government secrets for \$25,000.

According to Virginia-based psychiatrist David Charney, MD '68, spies often decide to betray their country out of an “intolerable sense of personal failure” that coincides with a “perfect storm” of unfortunately timed life developments. “I have learned to look for the pile up of pressures and stresses in the six months to a year before they make the drastic decision to cross the line,” he says. “The feeling of not being able to navigate your own life, that you’re not holding everything together, that you’re drowning. This is the starting point for all who cross the line.”

In Mallory’s case, he was deeply in debt and behind on his mortgage. For him, financial desper-

ation may have prompted his justification in crossing the line.

“If you feel like you’re a loser, that you’re a failure, how do you handle it?” Dr. Charney asks. “Some people will drink too much. Some people will have affairs. For the few who become spies, since they are embedded in the intelligence community, that’s where they will play out their internal troubles.”

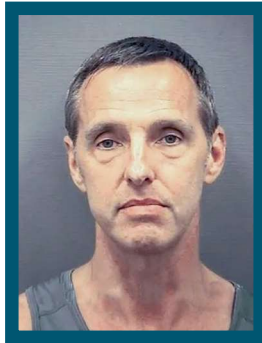
Charney is a leading expert in the psychology of the “insider” spy. The Brooklyn-born clinician has spent decades treating members of the intelligence community and served on the defense team for some of the most notorious spy cases of the past two decades. He is the founder of NOIR for USA, a non-profit organization dedicated to improving national security by helping the U.S. intelligence community, policymakers, and the public understand the psychology of those who become traitors.

Charney believes the emergence of China as a security threat, as well as the recent cases of so-called “whistleblowers” Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, illustrate the potential threat of the “insider spy,” not only within the government but also within companies serving as independent contractors on classified government projects.

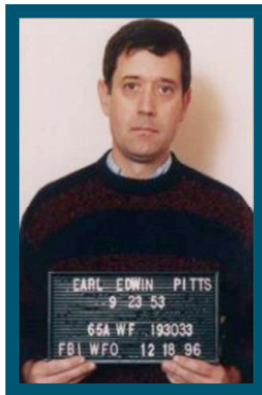
Rather than relying on methods that focus on catching a perpetrator in action through continuous active surveillance of a workforce, Charney advocates for internal initiatives to help troubled employees manage overwhelming life situations before it’s too late, in ways that build self-respect and are not hostile or threatening.



David Charney, MD '68



Ex-CIA officer Kevin Mallory



Earl Pitts

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“Prevention addresses the situation before the decision gets made to cross the line, and is the most important missing link in the security chain,” says Charney.

## INTELLIGENCE CONNECTIONS

Charney began his psychiatric career as a solo practitioner in Old Town Alexandria, treating adults with anxiety, depression, mood disorders and adult attention deficit disorder. After buying an office building, he expanded his practice to include other mental health practitioners.

That seemingly innocent business decision would go on to have interesting consequences. Unbeknownst to him, the mother of a psychiatric social worker he hired ran the Employee Assistance Program for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Nine months later, he received a letter from the CIA informing him he’d been approved to see referrals from the agency, something he was interested in doing but had never applied for. “It took me awhile to figure out how I got into the pipeline,” he says.

Charney began treating patients who were CIA employees. “Primarily, these folks had typical problems that one would see anywhere except that they were working inside of that unique space. Intelligence personnel are trained not to bring up anything classified and I was instructed not to ask questions about anything classified,” he says.

At the same time, Charney was hiring psychiatrists to “moonlight” on a part time basis. Some of these were government psychiatrists whose day jobs were primarily administrative and who wanted to keep up their clinical skills. One of them, “Larry,” was a psychiatrist at the State Department who noticed that Charney had an unusual number of patients from the CIA. Eventually, Larry came to him to confess that he actually worked for the CIA himself.

“This was great because I actually had someone to talk with who understood that world,” recalls Charney, who is also a clinical faculty member at George Washington University, teaching residents from the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences.

Larry was asked by a lawyer friend to consult on a case involving the defense of an FBI agent who turned out to be a KGB spy. Unable to assist due to conflict of interest, he referred the attorney to Charney.

That spy was Earl Pitts, who was arrested in 1996 for selling U.S. intelligence secrets to the Russians and was ultimately sentenced by a federal judge to 27 years in prison.



Charney himself was conflicted, as he'd developed loyalties to the CIA. "So to help someone who was a traitor to them was a tough call," he says.

Ultimately, the opportunity was too unique to turn down. "Knowledge about the psychology of people who cross the line was very thin. I thought that if I could determine the psychology of why he did what he did, I might be able to make a real contribution," he says.

Pitts' attorney had a limited budget and offered to pay Charney for several sessions with her client. Instead, Charney joined the defense team, pro bono, which meant no limitation on the time he could spend with Pitts. Based on what the attorney had told him, Charney knew Pitts was struggling with suicidal ideation and worried how to address that. "He's not actually a patient, he's a client," Charney recalls. "The attorney and I had limited ways to medicate or do other kinds of treatments that I could do in my private office. So how would I handle that?"

Charney came up with the idea that if this spy could open up to him and let him understand the psychology of how he came to his decision to cross the line, that information would be valuable to the intelligence community and would be a way for Pitts to partially atone for what he had done. Pitts agreed to be his guinea pig and the two met for two hours each week for a year.

That experience resulted in Charney's first white paper, "True Psychology of the Insider Spy." To deepen his understanding, Charney took a course in counterintelligence at Washington, D.C.'s Institute of World Politics and began studying other recent cases of insider spying in the United States from the vantage point of an experienced psychiatrist.

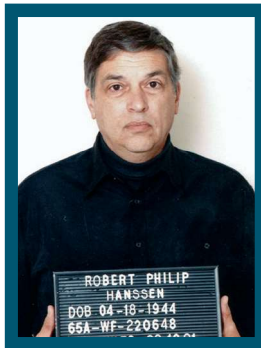
In 2001, Charney had another major opportunity to study the mind of the insider spy when he joined defense team of Robert Hanssen, a former FBI agent who sold thousands of classified documents to the KGB between 1979 and 2001 detailing U.S. strategies in the event of nuclear war, developments in military weapons technologies, and aspects of the U.S. counterintelligence program—espionage that's been referred to as the "worst U.S. intelligence disaster in history."

The Hanssen case was followed by the Brian Regan case, an Air Force intelligence officer arrested for stealing classified materials.

Now armed with interviews from three subjects in high profile cases, Charney was able to observe parallels and see patterns emerge.

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Robert Hanssen



Brian Regan

## CROSSING THE LINE

Despite efforts by intelligence agencies to pre-emptively screen out and deter potential traitors, defections still occur. Charney believes more attention needs to be paid to what's known about the mind of the insider spy.

As a medical doctor accustomed to looking at the mechanics of disease, Charney says because almost 95 percent of spies are male, he believes he has identified the genetic marker for spies—the Y chromosome!

"When you're dealing with a man, you always have to deal with male pride and ego. You're dealing with their own self appraisal of how they think they ought to be thought of," Charney explains. "But of course, everybody is their own worst critic. So, if a man feels that he's not measuring up to what he had in mind for himself, he views himself as a failure. And that eats at him terribly and he's got to do something to manage that terrible feeling."

How he handles it depends on the context of his life. For example, for someone in the intelligence community, spying may be a way of getting back at a boss he decided mistreated him. He may feel he can get retribution by showing superiors that he's smarter than they are.

Charney developed a general profile of spy psychology that outlines the key deliberative stages a person considering committing espionage may go through. Hurtful experiences in childhood may scar and sensitize, laying the groundwork. Additional stressors in work and private life that occur in a short timeframe (six to 12 months) may develop into a stress spiral that, along with a deep sense of being underappreciated, may open an individual to certain "opportunities," says Charney. The actual decision to take action is made when the stress becomes unbearable either in professional or personal life, or both.





Charney speaking at the Institute of World Politics

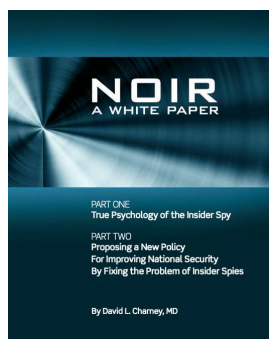
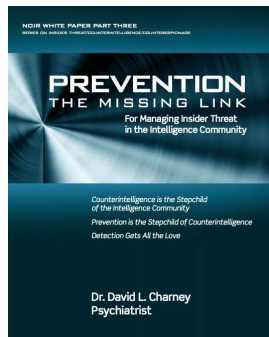
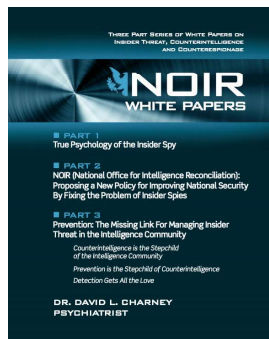
When the rationalization for potential spying or theft kicks in, the insider creates a personal bubble within which his actions make sense and are justified. He feels relief that his problems are solved. But once that honeymoon phase is over, the insider spy typically feels great remorse, says Charney. The reasoning that made sense earlier is now hard to follow, and now that he is a traitor, he is looking at a second failure from which there is no escape. Prison is inevitable.

## PROVIDING AN OFF RAMP

Because conventional prevention methods are far from foolproof, Charney has developed his own novel solution, which he outlined in his second white paper, “Proposing a New Policy for National Security by Fixing the Problem of Insider Spies.”

He calls it “reconciliation,” which essentially provides a government-sanctioned safe “off ramp” exit for the spy, creating an inducement for the spy to turn himself in when he realizes that his defection has only worsened his situation.

“With reconciliation, the insider spy turns himself in and must cooperate in delivering a full, complete, and truthful damage assessment—but he does not go to prison,” Charney writes. By



removing prison from the equation, he can “reconcile” what he’s done by turning himself in, helping prevent further damage caused by the security breach, and accept other punishment, such as loss of job and financial restitution, but which does not include life in prison.

Charney proposes the intelligence community create a National Office of Intelligence Reconciliation (NOIR), that would serve as a safe harbor of sorts for these insider spies, a way to lure them back and thus prevent further national security damage.

It’s an out-of-the-box concept that’s gotten mixed reviews from the intelligence community. While some say the concept could work, others fear that milder punishment may actually make it easier for foreign intelligence to recruit U.S. agents.

Like any good doctor, Charney has now turned his attention toward prevention. His most recent white paper, “Prevention: The Missing Link for Managing Threat in the Intelligence Community,” asserts there is overreliance on detection.

In truth, most spies are not caught through internal detection but after being identified to the U.S. by someone working for the foreign intelligence agency they have spied for.

Charney says there are two critical missing links in intelligence community security chains—exits for before someone crosses the line and exits for after someone crosses the line.

“If both missing links were added to the considerable number of existing and planned detection links, a full-spectrum solution would come into existence for the comprehensive management of insider threat,” says Charney. “We need more tools in the arsenal.”

Charney established a non-profit organization to advance his ideas called NOIR for USA. Charney’s concepts run counter to current practice and he admits that initially, he encountered little appetite for them from current officials.

“People who are still inside the government are not so quick to express support for these ideas because they have to adhere to the common wisdom prevalent inside the buildings right now,” Charney said. But former officials Charney has spoken with seem more receptive. “Privately, I’ve been told this is actually a pretty good idea,” he says.

*To read Dr. Charney’s white papers on insider threat, other related essays, and media coverage, visit his website: [NOIR4USA.org](http://NOIR4USA.org).*