

DOJ BLOWS SMOKE ON TIMING OF RUSSIAN SPY BUST

Earlier Tuesday, I did a post aiming to understand the timing of Monday's bust of 11 alleged Russian spies. Later in the day, Mark Hosenball did a post—heavily reliant on DOJ press spokesperson Dean Boyd—that doesn't make any sense.

First, Boyd states on the record that the reason DOJ had to move now on the busts was because someone—who must be the woman posing as Anna Chapman, who was going to go to Russia next week—was about to leave the country.

Several of the reasons remain classified, U.S. officials say, but one contributing factor has now been disclosed: at least one of the suspects was about to leave the country. "These arrests had to be carried out Sunday for several critical law-enforcement and operational reasons," Justice Department spokesman Dean Boyd tells Declassified. "Among these reasons was the fact that one of the suspects was scheduled to depart the United States and had to be arrested before departure. These operational considerations were the only factors that dictated the timing of the arrests.

Either Chapman is a more intriguing arrest than most of the other 10 defendants, or this is a load of bull. After all, the defendant posing as Richard Murphy was allowed to travel to Russia in February. And not only have they had Murphy under surveillance since at least 2004, but he seemed to serve as a bit of a sub-handler for the Seattle couple. By contrast, the FBI agent posing as a Russian handler for Chapman described the task he set her—passing money to

another alleged spy ring member, the same role Murphy served with the Seattle couple—as “the next step.” In other words, Murphy was already doing what Chapman was apparently being falsely tasked to do.

Now granted, maybe Chapman is more important than Murphy. But then that’s the reason they rolled up the network, right?

Then there’s the odd claim—one repeated widely in reporting on this story—that the defendants weren’t charged with a “real” spy charge.

As we previously reported, charges issued so far against the alleged “illegal” long-term Russian penetration agents do not accuse them directly of espionage—stealing or attempting to steal U.S. intelligence or defense secrets. Instead, court documents portray them as talent spotters, alleging that they were assigned to identify and ingratiate themselves with influential Americans who had access to U.S. policymakers or government secrets, the idea being that those individuals could then be targeted for more aggressive recruitment by other Russian spies.

Sure, these defendants appear not to have passed classified information. But they were charged with something that other notable spy defendants have been charged with recently: acting as an unregistered agent for a foreign power. Both the Venezuelan-Americans convicted of carrying a payment from Chavez’ government in Venezuela to Kirchner’s in Argentina and the cousin of Andy Card were charged with the same charge (though in the latter case, the charge was eventually dropped). (There’s also an Israeli alleged spy similarly charged, though I don’t have a ready link for it.)

There’s a narrative evolving about this bust that doesn’t make any sense.