



John Murray Rowe Jr.

- U.S. Citizen
- Born in Worcester, Massachusetts
- Age 67 at time of sentencing
- Test Engineer for several Cleared Defense Contractors for nearly 40 years



CDSE

Center for Development
of Security Excellence

CASE STUDY

Espionage

WHAT HAPPENED

Rowe, from Lead, South Dakota, worked as a test engineer for several companies over the span of nearly 40 years (1980-2018), the majority of which were cleared defense contractors (CDCs). Due to the sensitive nature of his work, which involved matters relating to U.S. Air Force electronic warfare technology, Rowe was granted access to national defense information, holding clearances from SECRET to TOP SECRET//SCI.

In April 2017, a Facility Security Officer (FSO) identified Rowe as a potential insider threat based on a review of his online social media profile and posts he made, one of which indicated he had provided information on U.S. fighter jets to a suspected Russian spy, which he knew was prohibited. These concerns were relayed to the Defense Security Service (subsequently reorganized and renamed the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency). In February 2018, while employed with another CDC, Rowe attempted to bring a thumb drive into a classified space in violation of company policy and subsequently inquired about holding both a U.S. and Russian security clearance. Following multiple security violations, Rowe was terminated from employment in March 2018.

Based on Rowe's previous actions, the FBI began an undercover operation to determine his willingness to act on behalf of a foreign government. In March 2020, Rowe met with an FBI undercover agent (UC) whom he believed was a Russian intelligence operative. During this meeting Rowe disclosed classified information about sensitive military technologies. Over the next eight months, Rowe exchanged over 300 emails with the UC, routinely expressing a willingness to cooperate and eventually move to Russia to continue working for the Russian government. In September 2020, Rowe met the UC in person for a second time, again disclosing classified information.

Rowe was arrested on December 15, 2021, and subsequently pleaded guilty to one count of attempted delivery of national defense information to a foreign government and three counts of willful communication of national defense information.

On 15 September 2025, Rowe was sentenced to 126 months in prison, three years of supervised release, and a \$25,000 fine for attempted espionage.

INDICATORS

- **Foreign Considerations** – Rowe repeatedly expressed interest in moving to Russia and even inquired about the possibility of simultaneously holding a Russian and U.S. security clearance. Rowe reaffirmed these intentions over a series of emails exchanged with the FBI UC. Rowe was quoted as telling the UC "If I can't get a job here [in the U.S.] then I'll go work for the other team."
- **Technical Activity** – A coworker witnessed Rowe bring a USB drive into a cleared facility in violation of company policy. When confronted, Rowe stated he was attempting to install software onto his computer.
- **Personal Conduct** – Rowe's social media activity was highlighted as a cause for concern by an FSO. In one post, Rowe revealed he had provided a woman he suspected of being a Russian spy with information related to military fighter jets. This post was a contributing factor to the initiation of the espionage investigation.

IMPACT

- Assistant Director Roman Rozhavsky of the FBI's Counterintelligence Division stated - "By attempting to disclose classified information on U.S. Air Force systems to the Russian government, John Rowe endangered American lives and compromised U.S. national security."
- Although the FBI was able to apprehend Rowe prior to him engaging with a Russian Foreign Intelligence Entity, he admitted to providing sensitive information to a woman who he thought was a Russian spy. The potential damage of Rowe's actions was minimized due to the proactivity of security personnel – specifically the FSO who identified Rowe as a potential insider threat and relayed those concerns to the Defense Security Service, who subsequently provided the information to the FBI. The actions taken by the FSO, along with those who reported Rowe for his attempts to bring a thumb drive into a classified facility, further highlight the importance of workforce vigilance and the need to report suspicious activity to the appropriate authorities.

ADDITIONAL INFO

- Rowe repeatedly expressed concern that his illicit activities would be discovered by the U.S. Government. He communicated to the purported Russian agent his concerns and described the efforts he was using to avoid detection – namely disguising his burner phone and deleting emails.
- During the chain of emails exchanged between Rowe and the UC, Rowe stated he was making his granddaughters learn Russian. Rowe planned to flee to Russia after the COVID-19 travel ban had been lifted. He believed he would be able to receive Russian citizenship while maintaining his social security checks from the U.S.
- During his pretrial confinement, Rowe made three additional unauthorized disclosures of the same national defense information he had revealed previously. These disclosures came during recorded phone conversations with his brother, son, and a realtor.

Questions to consider:

- How can your organization proactively address the threat posed by insider threats? What measures are currently in place to detect this type of activity?
- Without the astute observation of a coworker (regarding the USB) and the proactivity of the FSO (regarding the social media posts) what is the potential damage to national security Rowe may have caused?

Resources for further exploration:

- Foreign Intelligence Entity (FIE) Targeting and Recruitment Job Aid
(<https://www.cdse.edu/Portals/124/Documents/jobaid/insider/foreign-intelligence-entity-targeting-recruitment-methodology.pdf>)
- The Psychology of Spies Webinar
(<https://www.cdse.edu/Training/Webinars-and-Conferences/Webinar-Archive/The-Psychology-of-Spies/>)
- Potential Risk Indicators: Foreign Considerations
(https://www.cdse.edu/Portals/124/Documents/jobaid/insider/potential_risk_indicators_foreign_considerations.pdf)
- Potential Risk Indicators: Insider Threat
(<https://www.cdse.edu/Portals/124/Documents/jobaid/insider/INTJ0181-insider-threat-indicators-job-aid.pdf>)

Supporting Through Reporting!

Contact the appropriate POC to report any observed potential risk indicators:

Name: _____ Agency/Department: _____
Title: Supervisor/Security Officer/ITP Senior Official/ITP Manager