

# —Operation MONOPOLY—

## Digging for Secrets in Washington, D.C.

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*Photo courtesy of*

THE INTERNATIONAL SPY MUSEUM

When construction crews started work on a new embassy complex for the Soviet Union on Washington, D.C.'s Wisconsin Avenue, many local residents were not amused. After all, this was still the Cold War. The FBI, on the other hand, spotted a golden opportunity. In 1977, with embassy construction proceeding above ground, the Bureau and the National Security Agency (NSA) launched operation MONOPOLY—digging an underground tunnel to eavesdrop on unwitting Soviet diplomats above.

The FBI discreetly purchased several real estate objects in the neighborhood as observation posts, and one house as a starting point for the tunnel. Two FBI undercover agents moved in to maintain the semblance of normalcy to the outside world. But spotting the spooks quickly became a neighborhood pastime. Locals told of a three-storey building with permanently drawn shutters that

no one had lived in for years and where no mail was ever delivered. Despite this, neighbors said, people came and went on a shift basis through the rear entrance. Another resident recalled: "Once I came back from a party and I could see a telephoto lens sticking out of the upper window (facing the embassy)."

Meanwhile, MONOPOLY faced unexpected problems: water leaked into the tunnel, the NSA's high-tech equipment often didn't work, and exploding costs eventually left the FBI with a bill of several hundred million dollars. Moreover, the "moles" were uncertain about their exact location. As one FBI man recalled: "We had the plans [of the embassy], but you don't know what a room is used for. It might end up being a Xerox room or a storage room. What you want is a coffee room where people talk."

When the Cold War ended, the Soviet Union (now Russia) still had not officially opened their new embassy, yet the tunnel project continued regardless. In the 1990s, the FBI finally decided to end the financially ruinous MONOPOLY game and seal the tunnel.

According to John F. Lewis, Jr., former assistant director of the FBI in charge of the intelligence division, the tunnel had produced "no information of any kind. I don't remember receiving any intelligence." And even if the tunnel had gone operational after the Russian embassy moved to Wisconsin Avenue in 1994, MONOPOLY would have been doomed; in 1989, FBI agent Robert Hanssen had betrayed the project to the Soviets, a fact that emerged after Hanssen's arrest in 2001.

In the wake of MONOPOLY's exposure, the tunnel's most intriguing aspect became its precise location. Many neighbors believed a heavy manhole cover near the embassy was one of several entrances to the tunnel. Another resident told the press that two mysterious subterranean chambers in his house adjacent to the Russian embassy were really part of the FBI's tunnel system. Unfazed by rampant speculation about the tunnel's whereabouts, Russia's ambassador, Yuri V. Ushakov, demonstrated his good sense of humor when queried: "If we find it, perhaps we can use it as a sauna." ■

