

Espionage suspect has friends puzzled; Astronomer is described as brilliant, ambitious

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By all accounts, Stewart D. Nozette is a brilliant and creative scientist, an astronomer who once sketched a key part of a lunar mission on the back of a cocktail napkin and daydreamed of colonizing the moon.

In a recent photograph, he appears the caricature of a NASA geek: a pudgy man wearing an ugly green shirt with a pen protruding from the pocket. Wisps of his hair scatter in all directions.

But Nozette is not your stereotypically shy, reserved genius. He is ambitious and unafraid to engage in political combat. He has been known to prod public officials and lawmakers to fund his programs or scuttle those of rivals, friends and colleagues said. He has donated more than \$35,000 to politicians and causes.

And, according to recently unsealed court documents, he stole lots of government money to finance personal credit cards, mortgages, car loans and maintenance on his swimming pool.

It's those traits -- his hubris and expensive tastes -- that might explain why the astronomer regarded by many in his field as accomplished and gifted has landed in such serious trouble with the law, investigators and former colleagues say.

Nozette, 52, who has held sensitive military and civilian government jobs, was indicted Oct. 21 on two counts of attempted espionage, accused of giving sensitive government information to an undercover FBI agent posing as an Israeli intelligence officer.

The agent paid Nozette \$11,000 for classified material, which was exchanged in recent weeks through a "dead drop" post office box, the FBI says. A federal judge in the District has ordered him held without bond until a hearing Thursday.

The charges carry the death penalty, although prosecutors do not seem inclined to seek it. In a news release, the Justice Department said Nozette faces life in prison if convicted.

Nozette's attorney, John Kiyonaga, declined to comment. No one answered the door last week at Nozette's Chevy Chase home.

Friends said they couldn't come up with a motive for Nozette's suspected conduct. Nozette, the son of a well-off Chicago plastics executive who worked on the U.S. government's Manhattan nuclear bomb project in the 1940s, never seemed to need money. There were no outward signs that he might be upset with his country.

With a doctorate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he spent most of his life toiling on some of the government's most sophisticated defense systems and civilian space programs. His only fixation, friends said, seemed to be finding evidence of ice on the moon.

"Stewart is too smart to be caught up in something like this," said science fiction author Jerry Pournelle, who worked with Nozette and others in the early 1980s to advise the U.S. government on space policy. "I just find the whole thing very odd."

Pournelle and a handful of other friends and neighbors said they had no idea that Nozette had been on the government's radar screen for an unrelated crime.

With help from his wife, Wendy McColough, Nozette ran an aerospace consulting firm, the Alliance for Competitive Technology, out of his two-story white brick house on Grafton Street in Chevy Chase. ACT said in tax documents that it was serving "the national and public interest by conducting scientific research and educational activities."

But, authorities said, the company was stealing tens of thousands of dollars from the government. Three years ago, NASA's inspector general began investigating allegations that Nozette filed false claims for improper reimbursements for ACT's work.

Federal prosecutors in the District said in court papers unsealed Friday that Nozette over-billed the government by

\$265,000 from 2000 through 2006. The cash financed personal expenses, including paying off personal credit cards, maintaining the family's swimming pool and financing sedan rides for his wife to and from her government job, according to court papers filed by Assistant U.S. Attorney Michael K. Atkinson.

McColough is not charged in the case but is identified as "co-conspirator 1" in court papers. She could not be reached for comment, and Nozette's attorney said he urged her not to talk to the media.

In January, Nozette pleaded guilty to fraud and tax evasion. But the case was sealed by a federal judge because the scientist was providing information about unrelated investigations of government corruption, prosecutors said. Nozette might have even been needed to go undercover, prosecutors said in June.

Although his access to classified information had been revoked in 2006, Nozette was permitted to continue working on at least two NASA space projects because he was helping authorities, a law enforcement official said.

Under the plea deal, Nozette faced at least two years behind bars.

Last year or early this year, Nozette told a colleague that he would flee to India or Israel if the U.S. government "tried to put him in jail," according to law enforcement officials and court records. He told the colleague he would share "everything" he knew with those governments, an FBI agent wrote in court papers.

The colleague tipped off federal investigators who were concerned because Nozette had spent years consulting for an aerospace company owned by the Israeli government, law enforcement officials said, and was working on a lunar mission run by India's space agency.

Authorities were also worried that Nozette had extensive access to classified information. From 2000 to 2006, the FBI said in court papers, Nozette helped develop "highly advanced technology" as a contractor for the Defense Department and NASA.

Last month, an undercover FBI agent posing as an Israeli operative called Nozette to see whether he would sell his government secrets. Nozette agreed, the FBI said.

Soon, authorities said, the agent and Nozette were meeting over lunch and in hotel suites. "I had all the nuclear clearances," the FBI said he told the agent. "I had a whole raft of . . . special access."

Nozette asked the agent to pay him for the sensitive information, an FBI agent wrote in court papers.

"I don't get recruited by Mossad every day," he told the agent, referring to the Israeli government's intelligence agency, the affidavit says. "I knew this day would come."

"How's that," the agent replied.

Nozette laughed. "Just had a feeling."

At another meeting, the FBI said, Nozette told the agent that he no longer had access to classified information but that he had a good memory.

Nozette twice visited a post office box in Washington last month and picked up cash totaling \$11,000 as well as written instructions and questions from the undercover agent, authorities said.

He later returned with envelopes filled with classified information on topics such as the United States' early-warning systems and major elements of defense strategy, federal prosecutors say.

The sting ended with Nozette's arrest Oct. 19 at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington. The Justice Department has said that the Israeli government is not accused of any wrongdoing in the case.

Friends said they never saw a hint of legal trouble in Nozette's past. Even as a college student, he seemed to have only one interest: space.

Nozette, described as a serious student at the University of Arizona, also belonged to campus groups run by undergraduates that one of his professors described as "space groupies, not necessarily scientists or engineers."

He was especially interested in determining whether the moon or an asteroid had enough water to support human colonization, a quest that would guide his career. "He had this huge appetite to learn everything," said the professor, Laurel Wilkening.

By the 1990s, Nozette had a top security clearance for the U.S. Department of Energy and was working on the Clementine, a 900-pound satellite that set out to map the moon. The mission was an offshoot of the military's Star Wars defense program.

Nozette is largely credited with figuring out how to use a radar beam to try to detect ice on the lunar surface.

"His brain goes twice the speed of regular people," said Anthony Zuppero, a former colleague, who said Nozette outlined the radar portion of the mission on a napkin during lunch with a military officer.

Nozette and other scientists announced in 1996 that the satellite had detected a 38-square-mile lake of ice on the moon's south pole. But the discovery was met with skepticism -- the data supporting the finding came from a single pass by Clementine over that stretch of the moon's surface.

Nozette wanted to repeat the experiments with more sophisticated equipment, former colleagues said, and he lobbied lawmakers and officials to give him another chance.

But NASA had another probe, the Lunar Prospector. Nozette and a colleague visited top-ranking NASA officials in hopes of ending the mission and getting the funding for their project, said Alan Binder, the lead scientist on the Prospector.

Binder, who fended off the assault, said he never forgave Nozette. "He wanted the glory," Binder said. "He wanted the mission."

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