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PROGRAM:

NEWSLINE ROUNDTABLE

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Panelists: Jamie Bragg
Tom Lewis
Warner Wolfe

GUEST: Sylvia Press, author of The Care of Devils

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Miss Press joined the program by telephone from
New York.

JAMIE BRAGG: You know, when we first saw your book, we thought it was a new book -- it's called The Care of Devils, by Sylvia Press. First of all, what do you mean by that title? I notice you quoted Thomas Paine.

SYLVIA PRESS: That's right -- now if you'll just give me half a second here --

BRAGG: Go right ahead.

PRESS: It's a little long, I'm trying to remember it -- and with the microphone stuck in my face -- "Neither have I so much as the infidel in me, as to suppose that He -- meaning God -- has relinquished the government of the world, and given us up to the care of devils." That's the quotation from Thomas Paine . . . I felt -- well of course, I was in government -- maybe that's why the thing occurred to me as being so apt when I saw it. But I felt that when this thing was happening, it was almost as though God had turned His back, you know, and given us up to irresponsible people, more than devils. That's really more what I had in mind, because I'm not a bitter person by nature, -- am I talking too much?

TOM LEWIS: No. Miss Press, the devils that you are talking about are really the bureaucrats, aren't they?

PRESS: Exactly. It's the people who are apparently willing to lead their lives by machines, and by rote, you know.

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LEWIS: Miss Press, a lot of your book -- without getting into the specifics of the CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY right now -- a lot of the thrust of your book was to the effect that bureaucracy, as we know it, particularly in Washington, tends to stifle the imagination, and that --

PRESS: That's very true. I felt that all the time I lived in Washington, long before the incident that is described in the book ever happened.

LEWIS: You mention -- or you make the point quite strongly -- that a bureaucrat tends to worry more about his personal security than getting the job done. Do you have any solution to this -- is there an alternative to our system of the Civil Service, and the bureaucratic offices, to avoid this kind of tendency?

PRESS: Well, I don't know how you can breed people with more imagination and more heart. I think it's something that goes much deeper than our Civil Service, or anybody's civil service. I think it's something that starts within all of us, and I think the only thing to do is strive to be the kind of people who try to understand each other, rather than depend on mechanical things. I think the tendency these days is to get farther and farther away from the human being, and I deplore that -- I am worried about it -- I fear it.

BRAGG: Miss Press, are the incidents in your book factual? Is this a factual story, or is it a novel?

PRESS: It's an autobiography, but I put it into the form of a novel for a number of reasons. For one thing, I had no desire to derogate the agency. I feel it's very necessary, as long as we are living in the kind of world we live in, and as an American, I want to see the best there is, but as I say, I didn't want to direct it to the agency specifically. Another thing is that I felt -- I had written before that -- I hadn't published it, except in radio, I used to be in radio myself, but I hadn't had a book published before that -- but I do have the instincts of a writer, and I know that there are some things that you leave out, because they're not the kind of things that will impel people to read. I did not add anything -- I left out quite a bit -- it lasted over seven weeks, and couldn't put it all in. Couldn't remember every word --

BRAGG: Sure.

PRESS: And I also felt that there were some things in my personal life that was certainly terribly difficult for me to go into during this period, and wouldn't have been any easier for me to go into, in the book. And I thought if I wrote it in the third person I could say these things more easily, without being hurt by them.

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BRAGG: Perhaps at this point we should get from you an idea of what the book is about, for those people who are listening, and may not have read it -- just a general idea of what the book concerns.

PRESS: Well, the book really concerns me, I suppose, most of all.

BRAGG: As a CIA agent.

PRESS: I had been with the OSS -- the Office of Strategic Services -- during the war. I had been abroad for a couple of years. I was an intelligence officer, and when I came back, I was asked to remain on in the CIA. New York is my home town, and therefore I'm a little partial to it. Although Washington is a beautiful city, and I know that there are many fine things in it. But I had wanted to come home, but I was urged to stay on because I had by then accumulated a good deal of information about the areas that I had been in, information that was becoming rather rare, because so many people were leaving the original agency at that point. So I did stay on, and in all, between the two agencies I was in it for 12 years, when this thing happened.

And out of a blue sky, I was called into the security office one day. I had just completed a report -- they called it a study -- which was highly recommended by my division chief, just that very day, and I was called into security, and I have a pretty good memory, and I thought that as on previous occasions, occasionally people had called me into ask about a certain incident or a certain name, you know. I got in there, and I felt fine, sitting opposite these two men -- I knew one of them personally -- I had worked on some papers with him -- and it didn't dawn on me for some time, that this thing was directed towards me. I thought it was a case that they were interested in, but eventually when they started asking personal questions, as to when I was born, which they had in about 50 different places, on about 50 different forms, you know, I began to wonder at that point, why they needed all this when they had it all.

And then, after a day or so of this, particularly after they asked me for my badge -- you know the thing that lets you into and out of your own office building -- I was completely shattered at that point -- I think that was the first really low point that I faced.

WOLFE: How long ago was this?

PRESS: It was in 1954, in the summer. Well, for seven weeks I was interrogated every day, with very few exceptions, when they were busy about something else -- I don't know what. And for seven weeks I was interrogated, just roamed like bulls in a china shop through my life, and they trod on things that

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really are so personal and so intimate, that I was just torn. I couldn't see anybody -- I was practically under house arrest, you might say, if you want to compare it to something a lot worse. And little by little I was so completely undermined physically as well as mentally, that I entered a hospital, and I think they began to realize then what they were doing to me, and eventually they submitted their report -- whatever it was, I don't know. I don't even dare to contemplate what they might have written. And they submitted it to the Director ... and he decided to fire me, so they said.

Well when I learned that, my immediate reaction was -- I want to see him, and you never saw two more frightened men in your life. They looked absolutely white, and said, well, I suppose that anyone can ask to see the Director, if you want to take a chance -- and I did. I went to the Director -- and from his questions -- do you want me to mention his name?

BRAGG: No, I'd rather you wouldn't.

PRESS: All right, that's what I thought. When I went to him, to try to tell him what had been going on, he didn't even know that I had been there for 12 years, didn't know that I had worked in his department; didn't know the name of the man he kept bringing up all through this, who had been in his department, and asked me what ever became of him. It was just like Alice in Wonderland -- I didn't know what was going on. But I realized that either they had not shown him a report of what they had been going through for seven weeks, or else he hadn't read it. I didn't know which it was. In either event it didn't do me any good.

WOLFE: Miss Press, in the review of your book by Malcolm Muggeridge, the one that was published in Esquire, he puts the question, well why didn't you just quit when all of this was happening, and get a job -- how did he put it -- a bar tender or something? He says that you were a willing victim, and that you have lost your right to protest, because you have participated in this sort of thing yourself. What do you say to that.

PRESS: Well I think that's very true. Knowing the effect it had on me, too. After all I had been an intelligence officer. I knew that I had traced the background and the activities of many people, not my own compatriots -- that's not the job of the CIA, and isn't, but I had to go on bits and pieces of information, and it was only by (word unclear), according to my way of looking at it, that you could ever arrive at a consummation of what was truth and what was not truth. But these men didn't seem to know their jobs. In fact there were times when I wanted to help them

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on, and suddenly realized, said wait a minute, this is my neck that they're talking about.

WOLFE: I think we have time for one more quick question, Miss Press, I'd like to ask you now that you've had years to assess what happened to you, and you had years in intelligence work -- do you feel still, that clandestine and sometimes immoral methods are still necessary in terms of gathering intelligence, and in counter-intelligence? Are these things still necessary to preserve our way of life, which is supposedly dedicated against these things?

PRESS: I think I can give you only one answer to that, and that is that we are not in this business to ruin each other. And our own compatriots.

WOLFE: Who are we trying to ruin?

PRESS: Fear is the thing that really causes these things.

WOLFE: Who are we trying to ruin, then? Who decides who gets ruined?

PRESS: Well I think the ruination came about by the lack of intelligence of the people -- I mean intelligence in the broader sense -- the lack of intelligence of the people who were trying to do the interview, or the interrogation. I think they didn't know their jobs.

BRAGG: Miss Press, may I ask you a question about your book, which is now out as a paperback -- the Care of Devils -- when your book originally came out in 1958, it was a hard back. Is that correct?

And as I understand, there were only 3,000 copies of it printed. What were your suspicions at the time, as to why only 3,000 copies were printed. Did you go back to the publisher and inquire to see what was going on? There is some intimation that your book was suppressed --

PRESS: The intimation was made by Esquire, they seem to have information that I don't have.

BRAGG: Did you ever feel that way yourself about it?

PRESS: It never dawned on me. I still had that much faith in my fellow men, not to think that that was the real reason -- I mean that it could have been suppressed.

BRAGG: That's interesting -- well thank you very much for talking with us, and taking your time out to visit with us back here in Washington, D. C. again . . .