



Editor's Viewpoint

Public Relations Hopeless at CIA

Organizations — both public and private — spend huge amounts of time and money seeking acceptance and understanding. But even the slickest of efforts are sometimes doomed.

Last week I watched an important government agency flop miserably. As part of its new openness policy the CIA invited a group of journalists to a "candid briefing session" and tour of its McLean headquarters.

I had been looking forward to the CIA's first organized media tour. I had hoped so see the world's most sophisticated photo lab, the locksmith shop where safecrackers are trained, or maybe the "prop department" where Hunt and Liddy were equipped before they broke into Daniel Elsborg's psychiatrists's office.

No such luck. All I saw was a handsome auditorium and reception room, plus long corridors decorated with abstract art and portraits of former Agency directors.

The need for mutual respect was the briefing's theme. The tone was apologetic.

The CIA's leadership recognizes the paradoxical relationship between spying and the free flow of information. Still they apparently believe charm will make the press more benign.

Instead of admitting the existence of an irreconcilable conflict, the briefing team tried to convince their media guests that a new era of frankness had arrived. If they were "reasonable", reporter inquiries would be welcomed.

FRANKNESS IMPOSSIBLE

The evening included some showmanship. A piece of dissolving paper was placed in a drinking glass. It disappeared. Then the speaker ate a sheet. Afterwards he passed out samples suggesting that notetakers might want to eat their words.

Questions about agents, areas of operation, budgets, employe relations were all treated the same way. They were summarily dismissed.

"That's something we can't discuss," was repeated again and again. The response was proper.

After each rebuff I asked myself, why invite people to a question-and-answer session when free discussion is prohibited. It is impossible to be open and frank about an organization whose work is covert and clandestine.

The CIA's 14 person public relations staff has a head you win, tails I lose assignment. While its successes remain secret, its failures (Bay of Pigs, Chile, Vietnam's President Diem) are aired in the public.

Would the CIA consider press backgrounders like those conducted at the White House and Pentagon, one journalist asked. The answer: "Absolutely no! We talk on the record. Or not at all."

SWEETTALK

The Freedom of Information Act is posing problems for the CIA. Although it involves public disclosure, it is not a public relations matter in the usual sense.

Over 100 CIA people (lawyers, librarians, translators, scientists, technicians, in addition to clerical and stenographic personnel) work full time on Freedom of Information inquiries. CIA documents are unique. In an apparently innocuous document may be references to specific agents or incidents. These must be deleted. Declassification by category or subject is impossible.

There is a big difference between "honesty" and "openness". Smooth public relations cannot make them the same, or even similar. It only emphasizes the distinction.

Under no circumstances will the CIA disclose information about "sources and methods". Spies' names, as well as their techniques, locations, and procedures, will be protected to the end. That is how it should be.

Those who conduct foreign intelligence operations on behalf of a free society play an ambiguous role. Their press relations will always be strained. And public relations sweet talk won't make them better.

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