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P. McCoy, Alfred
C. Meyer, Marchetti, Victor
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The C.I.A. as Book Reviewer

By RICHARD R. LINGEMAN

Time was when the Central Intelligence Agency was accused of some particularly dirty trick by the press it would reply blandly, "The C.I.A. neither confirms nor denies the charge." Recently, however, the agency has departed from its customary inscrutability; it has doffed the cloak, drawn the dagger and intervened openly in the book-publishing process. The most publicized of these interventions has been its demand to examine, prior to publication, the manuscript of "The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia," by Alfred W. McCoy, which as the review in this issue points out, makes some serious allegations about the C.I.A.'s inadvertent involvement in the heroin traffic. In another less publicized case, the agency enjoined a book by a former agent named Victor Marchetti which had been contracted for but not yet written.

The background of the McCoy affair is, briefly, this. After Mr. McCoy's charges had become public knowledge in June, Cord Meyer Jr., a C.I.A. official, called on Harper & Row and reportedly raised questions regarding the book's accuracy, libel and the national interest. On July 5, the C.I.A. formally asked to see the manuscript, saying that "Mr. McCoy's claims . . . are totally false and without foundation"; libel and the national interest were not mentioned. On July 19, Harper & Row, through its counsel B. Brooks Thomas, agreed to make the manuscript available under certain conditions (including confidentiality) despite the firm's belief that "Mr. McCoy's scholarship is beyond reproach." In addition Mr. Thomas wrote, "We do not mean to imply that we will make changes in the work because you request them or even because you believe the statements made to be harmful to some agency of our government."

The C.I.A. critique of the manuscript was sent on July 28; in its reply of Aug. 4, Harper & Row, after consultation with the author, made a rather devastating point-by-point refutation and announced it would publish the book unchanged.

So what is the problem? After all, submitting books to prior review by experts in the field is nothing new. It is done frequently by scholars who send early drafts to colleagues in their field for criticism. To inject a personal note, I

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wrote a book on drug abuse and was glad to accede to the publisher's suggestion that an expert read it over for possible errors. And, of course, Harper & Row says that "The Politics of Heroin" was read "by independent authorities" before the C.I.A. entered the picture.

But the case of McCoy v. the C.I.A. is distinguishable, as the lawyers would say. Because of the highly secretive nature of the C.I.A.'s operations, the information uncovered by Mr. McCoy could only have been obtained by independent investigation. Further, Mr. McCoy's allegations were taken by the C.I.A. as highly embarrassing—so embarrassing that they jarred the agency into abandoning its traditional low profile. Letters from high C.I.A. officials were fired off to The Washington Star and Harper's magazine, which had published some of Mr. McCoy's material, attempting to impeach his veracity. The battle lines were clearly drawn.

It should be made clear at this point that Mr. McCoy's book does not raise problems of classified information or national security. Although a C.I.A. representative reportedly mentioned libel and the national interest at one point, these words did not come up in their official letter of July 5—probably because there were no grounds for urging them. It is curious, then, that in a letter to The Village Voice defending Harper & Row's action, Mr. Thomas summoned up the spectre of possible legal action. "One of the reasons for volunteering the book," he wrote, "was in the hope of avoiding such expense [of a trial] by convincing the C.I.A. that they had no case for court action."

And yet Cord Meyer told The Times's Seymour Hersh, "We at the agency at no time thought we had any right to suppress the book." Certainly there is no threat of legal action in the Harper & Row-C.I.A. correspondence; if avoidance of a court battle was one of its motives, Harper & Row was being super-cautious, to say the least.

In any case, it is not the universal practice in publishing to let the C.I.A. review every book about it before publication. According to Robert Bernstein, president of Random House, his company twice refused such requests.

That there are circumstances under which the C.I.A. wants to play the role of pre-censor is shown by the Marchetti case. Mr. Marchetti, who had already written an unimpressive novel about a C.I.A. man, signed a contract with Alfred A. Knopf for a nonfiction work about the agency. In April the agency went to court and got an injunction against the book on the grounds that as a former employe of C.I.A. Mr. Marchetti had signed a secrecy oath and must obtain C.I.A. permission before the book is published. The case raises several interesting questions: Can a man contract away his First Amendment rights? Are former employes under a blanket prohibition from writing anything about the C.I.A.? And what of the public's right to know more about the C.I.A. than they do now? Must Mr. Marchetti confine himself to anonymous tips to Jack Anderson? At any rate, the case is now on appeal, with the American Civil Liberties Union acting in Mr. Marchetti's behalf.

As for Mr. McCoy's book, clearly he and the C.I.A. are in an adversary relationship; the only seemly place for them to fight it out is in the marketplace of ideas, not in the privacy of the publisher's office. No interest could be served by having the C.I.A. go over the manuscript prior to publication; it is like putting one's head in a man-eating tiger's maw to verify if he is hungry. Pre-review by a governmental agency, where the line of difference are as clearly drawn as they are here, is next door to prior restraint. Harper & Row may argue that it retains the final say throughout, but in fact it caved in and acted under a principle by which any governmental agency criticize by a book could demand to see it, cast doubts on the author's integrity with its own version of the "facts" (this at a time when publishers' memories of the Irving hoax are still fresh) and perhaps even cause its suppression if the publisher is timid and the author refuses to make changes. Governmental agencies, including the C.I.A., are not by definition liars but in some cases a plausible version of the truth that differs from "official" truth will surface; it should be protected, rather than submitted to bureaucratic bullying.

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Anderson, Jack

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