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# Borah Symposium brings CIA intervention to light

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"Murder is murder. We cannot compromise ourselves!"

"The select committee is slothful."

"Don't credential a procedure where we pick governments for other people by eliminating indigenous challenges."

"We need to recruit guerrillas to a better revolution."

The honors class was meeting in a small room just inside the entrance of the Psychology Building on the campus of the University of Idaho last week. Twenty-five or 30 of us had crowded in with the class members to listen. We sat on window sills and on the floor, and those who couldn't push through the door listened from the hallway.

The speakers were participants in the Borah Symposium held each spring in honor of the man who once was called the Lion of Idaho, Sen. William E. Borah. The annual symposium is Borah's legacy to the state he served in the U.S. Senate from 1907 to 1940. For 55 years the Borah Foundation grant has funded a meeting to "call public attention to the causes of war and the conditions of peace."

This year those causes and conditions were the role of the CIA in Latin America.

In that room, seated together around a small table, were: former CIA Director William Colby, two former agency "spooks" who had served in Latin America and elsewhere; the former U.S. representative who first acted to investigate CIA activities in Chile, a member of the current Sandinista government of Nicaragua, the head of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, and an exiled Chilean editor and film producer who heads Chile Democratico.

The classroom meeting was only one event of many in the two days of discussion that included speeches by all the participants, classroom meetings, several unscheduled confrontations, and an ongoing series of films about the CIA. A collection of duplicated articles and reference materials had been distributed throughout the campus in advance. Evening panel discussions were telecast live on public television.

Moments of high drama included an exchange between the two former agents, David Atlee Phillips and Ralph McGehee, shouting "Yes, you did," and "No, I didn't," over charges that a direct CIA payment of cash from Phillips had rewarded the organizers of a trucker's strike during the orchestrated economic destabilization of Chilean society that culminated in the assassination of President Salvador Allende.

Moments of impassioned moral oratory included a tirade by former U.S. Rep. Michael Harrington against covert actions such as those currently underwritten by the United States against the government of Nicaragua.

"We must not continue to be terrorists internationally. We must demonstrate what it is to be citizens of a free society," he said. "We must accept the risks of freedom for ourselves and others and not incrementally, deviously and secretly draw this country again into an immoral posture. ... We are obsessed with our fear of communism!"

Moments of cynical pragmatism included former agent Phillips saying continually, "Our presidents are strong, assertive men. ... We need to ask why they order these actions!" Phillips believes covert actions can not be eliminated, only restrained and limited to the responsibility of a very small executive agency.

Balancing these tensions was the cool logic of Colby's speech to the respectfully quiet ranks of the ROTC classes, describing the emergence of the need of a centralized government agency to handle intelligence after World War II. "There is a need-to-know guideline in intelligence," he explained. "Compartmentalization protects both information and the people involved. The difficulty comes when it must be determined who needs to know what to establish policy in an open society whose Congress must ultimately approve policy and also must be responsive to its own constituencies.

"Therefore," he concluded, "the American people need to know so they can participate properly in the debate."

Colby made that comment just before he joined his fellow participants in the honors classroom where a student voiced the other side of the need-to-know issue. "How do you get public awareness of all this?" he asked. "The people aren't interested."

"The newsmen are interested," Colby answered. "They are the public's surrogates."

It was an answer any newsmen would like to hear, except it rang hollow in the context. There were very few newsmen in evidence at the symposium. The local newspapers covered the events, but not in any real depth. Live telecasting of the evening sessions gave an opportunity to viewers — a worthy gesture. But it was probably only a gesture. It is safe to speculate that the Borah show did nothing to knock the regular ratings of Northern Idaho viewing out of kilter for even a percentage point.

In fact, the most revealing note in my voluminous pages on the Borah Symposium of 1984 is attributable not to a knowledgeable visitor, nor to the intensely interested few who crowded the small honors classroom. It came from a very bemused young man in a lethargic afternoon philosophy class who was still trying to figure out what was going on the second day of the symposium.

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The class was waiting quietly for the delayed arrival of their visitor, former CIA agent Phillips.

"What," he asked, "does covert mean?"

"Did you look it up in the dictionary?" asked his professor gently.

"I don't have one with me."

It was an exchange that would not make Sen. Borah rest any easier in his concern for his people, his state, the future and the causes of war and conditions of peace.

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