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'Disinformation' versus lies

THE NEW YORK Herald Tribune, of beloved memory, used to distribute throughout North America news articles written by a Soviet spy. He was H.A.R. (Kim) Philby, currently retired in Moscow, but in the early 1960s posing as the correspondent in Beirut of The Observer in London.

If the paper you were reading in those days carried Red Smith and Walter Lippman, chances are it also had Philby. He was part of the same package of news features.

This Soviet "disinformation" program—planting propaganda in the foreign press—is partly what President Reagan had in mind when he said on Jan. 29, 1981, that the Soviets "reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime; to lie; to cheat" to accomplish their goals.

Reagan added: "We operate on a different set of standards."

No, we do not, Adm. John Poindexter, director of the National Security Council, says. Poindexter authorized a campaign of "disinformation" aimed at Libyan leader Moammar Khadafy, against whom, apparently, all crimes are permissible.

In a briefing last week, Poindexter justified the use of lies, so long as the lies were not told to Americans: "You must distinguish between the audiences," Poindexter said. "You must distinguish between deception and disinformation."

Both of these distinctions are false. There is no difference, these days, between a foreign audience and an American one. News that appears in the foreign press is quickly picked up by American correspondents. And if they should happen to miss it, the CIA's Foreign Broadcast Information Service distributes daily summaries of foreign news reports to anyone interested.

The U.S. intelligence community is permitted, by Executive Order 12333, to plant lies overseas so long as "the role of the U.S. government is not apparent or traceable" but such lies "are not intended to influence the U.S. political process, public opinion, policies or media."

Fat chance. Secretary of State Alexander Haig came into office firmly believing that the KGB's Fifth Directorate was the mastermind behind all the world's terrorist groups, from the

Irish Republican Army to Abu Nidal. The State Department and CIA told him, unhappily, that this view, widespread in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was the result of a CIA disinformation campaign that had run amok and filtered back to American authors.

Perhaps what Poindexter had in mind by "deception" was the lie he ordered when reporters inquired about an imminent U.S. invasion of Grenada. "Preposterous," he said to White House spokesman Larry Speakes. "Preposterous," Speakes told the press—in good faith. Then the troops landed.

That kind of operational lie is understandable. In war, you do lie to protect your forces. But to this day, even Speakes no longer takes Poindexter at his word. "You also learned very early to be careful of what Poindexter told you," a reporter said to Speakes last week. "That's true," Speakes said. "And I am."

The lies that Poindexter says he intended for a foreign audience never made it into Pravda. They were reported instead in The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post and The New York Times. They said that Khadafy was plotting new acts of terror against Americans.

This is the same kind of lie the Nazis used in 1938, when they indignantly told the German people that Czech ruffians were beating up innocent Sudeten Germans—or in 1939 when the Polish Army started World War II by "attacking" a German radio station.

Secretary of State Shultz believes this lying is a perfectly suitable way to battle Khadafy. "If there are ways to make Khadafy nervous, why shouldn't we?" he asked.

So we fight Khadafy by telling lies to The Wall Street Journal—as we once "fought" Fidel Castro with plots to put itching powder in his beard and explosives in his cigar. What a sorry way for a superpower to behave.