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Spy or no spy, get Daniloff back

I have a little question for you and I'd like to see a show of hands: How many of you think that American journalist Nicholas Daniloff really might be a spy after all?

I think I see a few hands out there.

Nobody in my profession believes this, of course. Though we are a normally skeptical lot willing to believe the worst about anybody, Daniloff is one of us.

And so when he is picked up on the streets of Moscow with what the Soviets say is classified material, we know it is a frame-up and that he is as pure and innocent as the driven snow.

Or at least we are supposed to say that publicly. And this is because American journalists are not spies. Soviet journalists are. And Soviet physicists. And Soviet diplomats. And Soviet everything-elses. But not American journalists.

When an American reporter is arrested, he is a victim and a dupe and a hostage. When a Soviet is arrested, he is guilty.

Newsweek summed up this mind-set perfectly in its Sept. 22 issue. Keep in mind this is from a news story: "Neither Nicholas Daniloff, the reporter arrested on trumped-up charges, nor Genady Zakharov, the Soviet agent caught red-handed, was free to go home."

The New York Times and other newspapers merely say that Daniloff and Zakharov are "both accused of espionage."

Which is the simple fact. Zakharov was picked up in possession of material that was fed to him by U.S. intelligence sources. Daniloff was picked up with material that was fed to him by Soviet intelligence sources.

The difference? Well, we believe Zakharov really was a spy, recruiting American agents. And we believe Daniloff really was not a spy, but was set up by the Russians in revenge for the arrest of Zakharov.

And I, personally, believe that. I believe Daniloff is innocent. Because I have no reason to believe otherwise.

But the world of reporters and spying is a lot muddier than most people suspect. American journalists have spied for this country. Some have been quite proud of it.

This is not supposed to go on today. At least not too much. The CIA said some years ago that it no longer uses journalists except in "life or death" matters. Whatever those are.

And when Ronald Reagan says Daniloff is an innocent hostage, I believe him.

But if Ronald Reagan knew Daniloff was an American spy, would he say anything different? Would he say to the Russians: "Oh, yeah. Daniloff. A reporter who spies for us all the time. I guess you better shoot him."

Newsweek also ran an article containing this intriguing line: "Clearly, there is no comparing the KGB's systematic use of journalists as full-time spies and the CIA's occasional, informal cultivation of newsmen."

What? How's that again? You mean it's a matter of hours? Forty hours a week for the KGB and you're a systematic spy? Ten hours a week for the CIA and you're a cultivated newsmen?

I don't buy it. If you're a newsmen, you're a newsmen. Not a part-time tipster for the CIA. Why not? Why shouldn't you "help out" your country by spying a little every now and then?

Two reasons. First, that is not the role of an independent press. The press is not an agency of the government and reporters are not agents of the government, full- or part-time. Second, such "occasional, informal" cultivation by the CIA endangers all newsmen.

It sure endangered Daniloff. Don't you figure that the KGB believes all American newsmen are really spies? In 1976, the Senate Intelligence Committee said the CIA had covert relations with about 50 newsmen. That is supposed to be over now, but do we expect the KGB to believe that?

I have read a whole bunch of articles trying to figure out who goofed first in the Daniloff-Zakharov mess. Some say we goofed by grabbing Zakharov and then refusing him bail, breaking some kind of gentleman's agreement we have with the Russians. Others say the Russians goofed by grabbing an innocent American newsmen instead of grabbing an innocent American businessman. The press here does not get nearly as upset if a businessman is grabbed.

I say: Who cares who goofed first? Let's swap these two and get down to the far more important matter of limiting the nuclear arms race.

If that would make Daniloff look like a spy, he can correct that by telling his story when he comes home.

Daniloff won't be hurt one bit by all this. He'll get book contracts and speaking fees and a made-for-TV movie out of it.

Zakharov probably will get a one-way ticket to Siberia.

See? There is justice in this world.

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