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DATE 11-11-20 BY 60322 UCBAW

TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT
26 January 1987

Not so public affairs

CIA's official mouthpieces prefer the tight-lipped approach

STAT

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WASHINGTON — The voice on the other end of the telephone was describing the duties and frustrations of speaking for the Central Intelligence Agency.

"It's an organization that is really misunderstood," said the voice, which identified itself as that of Kathy Pherson, the CIA's media-relations chief, but which refused to grant a face-to-face interview or to allow the interview to be taped.

Welcome to the CIA public-affairs office — a department that seems to have the inside track on the Franz Kafka Contradiction-in-Terms award.

Consider:

In a closely guarded building in the Virginia suburbs of Washington is an office where the public and media are invited to direct questions about the Free World's largest spy agency.

But when the phone rings, the office workers consider it their primary function to explain why, most likely, they can't provide the information sought.

"The most important thing I do is try to explain to people why intelligence people can't talk about everything," said Pherson, who has been explaining the unasked for about five years.

On the other hand, Pherson said, people tend not to believe the CIA, even after it issues a flat denial of something.

"They think you're lying. They just as-

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— Kathy Pherson

sume that a denial is no comment," Pherson said, adding with a sigh, "I know what we've gone through to make a denial."

In the wake of the Iran-Contra affair, the CIA has been making more than its usual quota of denials.

In quick succession, the CIA recently has said it had nothing to do with a plane-load of arms shot down in Nicaragua, knew

nothing about the diversion of Iran arms-sales profits to Nicaragua's Contras, and did not provide phony spy-satellite data to Iraq and Iran.

—This outpouring isn't a reversal of policy, though. The CIA takes its secrets seriously, including those about the public-affairs office.

"We don't talk about numbers of people in any of the departments, even public affairs, but we're not very big," Pherson said.

The public-affairs office was formally organized in 1977, although the agency always has had somebody available not to provide information informally. The office also conducts VIP tours, arranges background briefings, checks books and articles by CIA veterans to prevent national-security leaks and explains the CIA to other government agencies.

Kathy Pherson, by the way, really is Kathy Pherson's name, she said, although adopting a cover name has occurred to her. Pherson works for George Lauder, the office's director, who declined an interview.

Both have come up through the agency and neither, Pherson said, was particularly "thrilled" about an article on their office. "My background is in intelligence analysis," she said.

Pherson declined to provide any personal details, but, based on a slip of the tongue that she was in sixth grade in 1962,

a Knight-Ridder Newspapers analysis has concluded she is about 36 years old.

Herb Hetu, the former CIA public-affairs director who organized the office under President Carter's administration, suggested the agency was more open then.

But Pherson, who also worked for Hetu, said there is no substantial difference in the way the agency operates now and that she is rather proud of the office's consistency. Some of the openness in the Carter years may have been "optics," she said.

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Hetu, who was a Navy information officer and representative for the Bicentennial Commission before coming to the CIA, recently hasn't said much as the spokesman for the special review commission, headed by former Sen. John Tower, R-Texas, that is investigating the National Security Council.

The CIA's inability to provide much information cuts two ways, according to Hetu, Pheron and others interviewed. "The CIA is fair game for anybody that wants to accuse the agency of anything," Hetu said.

"The attitude at the CIA is to hunker down, take your hits and go on, with the attitude that this too shall pass," said William Doswell, a

newspaper and public-relations person who had headed the office during an early period of the Reagan administration.

But within the confines of what they could say, all of the CIA representatives defended their honesty. "I may not be able to answer your question to your satisfaction," Doswell said, "but whatever I tell you is going to be true."

Still, the limits of the job sometimes are just as aggravating to the person speaking as to the person spoken to.

"I was privy to every secret in the place. It's a PR man's dream," Doswell said. "But the frustrating thing was I couldn't tell anybody."