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INTELLIGENCE AND THE PRESS

Address to the  
Associated Press Annual Meeting  
by  
William E. Colby  
on  
Monday, 7 April 1975

Fellow Publishers:

I presume to address you in this way to bring out a point which is not adequately perceived these days: that intelligence has changed from its old image to become a modern enterprise with many of the attributes of journalism. We collect much information in the same way you and your reporters do from open sources, such as the foreign press and radio, and those foreigners and Americans willing to talk to official American reporters, such as our Embassy officers, Defense Attaches, and CIA's clearly identified inquiring reporters here in the U. S.

Our collection process involves a lot more than these efforts, of course, but it is still the process of assembling individual bits of information from a variety of sources, cross-checking them, and coming up with reasoned assessments

and conclusions about them. I sometimes say, and not entirely in jest, that our publications have the largest staff, the smallest circulation, and the lousiest advertising of any journalistic enterprise.

One of our problems, of course, is an erroneous identification of current intelligence practices with old-fashioned spy stories. Just as the image of "The Front Page" hardly fits the modern investigating reporter, so the old spy story hardly reflects the enormous contribution technology makes to modern intelligence. Some of this technology has pressed the state of the art, as in the U-2 and certain other activities of which you may have become aware. In many of these, advances had to be made in secret in order to avoid alerting foreign subjects of these capabilities so that they not frustrate them. This contribution to modern information, in a variety of fields from photography to electronics, has revolutionized intelligence, and we now can run a pictorial supplement and a technical journal about foreign weapons systems and military forces which we could only generally sketch out from indirect sources in years past.

Just as in your profession, we are faced with the problems of success -- how to organize and articulate the key judgments and conclusions hidden in this explosion of raw information. For this I am pleased to say that we have adopted another attribute of the profession of journalism -- the editorial board. In the early days of World War II, our country faced the problem of an instant need for knowledge of such far-off places as South Pacific islands or the hump between India and China. We assembled from American academic circles, business circles, and journalism, staffs of experts of these areas. They then became the repository of all information on these subjects available to the United States Government.

This analysis staff has since developed into another unique American contribution to intelligence. At our Headquarters today, we probably have more doctors, masters, and other advanced students of complex disciplines from agricultural economics to nuclear physics than can be found in most large American universities. It is their task to separate the true from the false, the full from the half story, and the warped from the straightforward

report. They produce our publications, and their reputation for independence, objectivity and integrity is as precious to them as the reputation of your profession is to you.

Am I sliding over the old-fashioned concept of clandestine intelligence or our role in political and paramilitary work abroad? No. These are a part of our intelligence function, and they do make a unique and important contribution to the safety of our country. Some things cannot be learned by the inquiring reporter or ~~even the spy in the sky~~ <sup>technical means</sup>. Sources within a closed and authoritarian foreign society can let us know its secrets in these days of mutual vulnerability to nuclear warfare. When defense systems take years to build, we need to know of the hostile weapon while it is being planned, as well as when it is cocked. We must understand the personal and political dynamics which can produce threats from such societies. And, there are occasions in which some quiet assistance to friends of America in some foreign country can help them withstand hostile internal pressures before they become international pressures against the United States.

But while I do not wish to slide over these activities, I do wish to point out the comparatively small proportion they

play in our intelligence function and activities these days. The most important part of our mission is in the intellectual process of collecting, analyzing and presenting intelligence to assist in the important decisions our government makes about the safety of our country and the welfare of our people.

In the very function of intelligence, great changes have occurred. Intelligence no longer consists only of stealing the military secret so that the General may win a battle. Today it provides the basis for negotiations to remove or defuse military and economic threats to our country by mutual agreement rather than armed force. It thus fulfills a positive peace-keeping as well as its old defensive security role.

While I think our country has developed the best intelligence service in the world, I must warn you that it is in danger today. Intelligence by its very nature needs some secrets if its agents are to survive, if its officers are to do their work, and if its technology is not to be turned off by a flick of a switch. We in the American

intelligence profession are proud of our open society; this is why we devote our lives to its service. But we also believe that this open society must be protected and that intelligence, and even secret intelligence, must play a part in that protection in the world in which we live.

There are secrets in American society. Grand jury proceedings are secret, Congressional committees meet in secret executive sessions, we have secret military capabilities, and our journalistic profession insists on its right to protect its sources. But for some reason, secrets of intelligence arouse such public fascination that the letters "CIA" can move a story only tangentially referring to CIA from the bottom of page 7 to the top of page 1.

Mr. Charles Seib, the "ombudsman" of The Washington Post, recently wrote a critique of what he called the "sensational lead." This referred to the wire service practice in days gone by, and he stressed that they have gone by for the wire services today (both in the splendid Associated Press and Brand X) wherein a story would be

twisted and turned in order to get a sensational lead to catch immediate reader attention.

The CIA today, I fear, fits this category of the sensational lead. If CIA were in politics, we could perhaps take solace from the politician's old story about not caring what they said about him so long as they spelled his name right. But our intelligence agency today and its service to our country are being jeopardized by its status as the nation's number one sensational lead.

Our agents abroad are questioning our ability to keep their work for us secret, work they do with us because they believe in democracy too, but work which can jeopardize their lives if revealed. Many Americans who have helped their country through its intelligence service are concerned that they will be swept into the climate of sensationalism and their businesses abroad destroyed by a revelation of their patriotic assistance to CIA. And a number of cooperative foreign officials have expressed great concern to me as to whether they can safely continue to pass their sensitive information to us in this climate of exposure. We are already seeing some of these sources withdraw from their relationship

with us or constrict the information they provide us.

The foreign military attache in Washington can purchase at our newsstands information which our intelligence service must run the risk of life and death and spend hundreds of millions of dollars to obtain about his country. I do not object to this. In fact, it is one of the strengths of this great American society. But I do believe that with the benefits of our open society comes an equal responsibility to protect it by not revealing its attempts to protect itself through intelligence operations. That responsibility rests not only with the nation's intelligence service, it rests with every American. It rests especially with you, with your enormous power and freedom under our Constitution to choose which subjects to call to public attention and which ones to ignore.

I am pleased to say that in some <sup>various</sup> ~~recent~~ dealings with the journalistic profession, I found much evidence of this sense of responsibility, even from some of my most severe critics. This sense of responsibility was double-bladed. Part was a receptiveness to the valid



reasons why I believed certain information should be withheld from publication and consequent inevitable exposure to foreigners. Part of that sense of responsibility also involved a clear understanding that in our society the decision on this question was the journalist's, not mine, unless I could meet the Supreme Court's test of "direct, immediate and irreparable damage to our nation or its people."

Thus, on this question of intelligence and the press, I believe we Americans can quite easily agree on the general principles. It becomes difficult, however, if the story gets ahead of the capability to be responsible. For example, sometimes the journalist assumes that the story can do no harm, when, in reality, there are unrevealed facts about it which would change the journalist's mind. Some of our more critical journalists have a practice of calling the subject of a story to afford a chance of a denial or other comment. This does allow the presentation of good reasons to write the story so as to protect important secrets or even, in exceptional cases, to withhold it.

I do not have to make this appeal to this audience, as I know that your procedures would be the responsible ones. I do suggest, however, that you consider carefully

whether CIA really should be the sensational lead in any story in which it is mentioned even incidentally, and thereby fan the fires of excitement about CIA and inevitably obscure the real nature of modern intelligence and its contribution to our country.

I do not ask that "bad secrets" be suppressed. In fact, I have exposed some of our missteps of the past. I also believe that "non-secrets" should be exposed. A "non-secret" I define as a known fact about intelligence which in the old tradition would have been kept secret, but which in our open society should no longer be withheld. The public inquiry and debate we are conducting as to the proper authority, limits, and supervision of our national intelligence effort falls into this category. But I do make a plea that "good secrets" be respected, in the interests not of intelligence but of our nation. Our people must not only be protected in today's world, they should benefit in many other ways from what modern intelligence can provide. I do not ask that the healthy adversary relationship between the press and government (and our government's intelligence structure) should be abandoned.

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I only ask that we Americans protect our nation's sources  
in the same way the journalist protects his.

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