

MERIDEN RECORD-JOURNAL (CONN.)

26 April 1980

Editor's notebook

Journalists and CIA agents make unhealthy bedfellows

By Barbara C. White

When George Bush was head of the CIA, the news broke that the agency on occasion employed journalists to do its work. Sometimes it would approach people who had already secured a position in a particular country and persuade them to work undercover, along with the regular newswork. Sometimes a CIA agent would masquerade as a journalist.

Newspeople, editors and reporters, rose up in wrath. They labelled the policy dangerous to journalists, demeaning, self-defeating, counter-productive, a threat to the freedom of the press.

Bush, to his credit, saw the point. He issued a formal change of policy insuring that journalists accredited by the U.S. government would no longer be employed by the government as CIA agents or undercover operators.

Reversal

Editors in Washington recently reacted in shocked disbelief to the off-hand remark of the present CIA chief, Admiral Stansfield Turner, that it is now the policy of the agency to employ journalists as secret agents when deemed necessary. Speaking before the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Turner insisted that the change in regulations had been made public by him during a Congressional hearing three years ago. He conceded that the practice is used only when necessary, and that of three clearances which he has given on it, not one was put into practice.

If, as Turner states, the policy was publicly and formally reversed, then the nation's newspeople were caught with their sources down. The redoubtable Abe Rosenthal of the New York Times led the questioning and voiced his disbelief that such a change could have gotten by the army of reporters in Washington undetected.

However it happened, Turner has no doubts about the soundness of the policy and no intent whatsoever of changing it.

Turner's case.

He puts it on the simple ground of patriotism.

What newsgatherer or editor, he asks, would not be glad to help out the government, to perform a patriotic duty, to contribute to the well-being of his country? Is this not a small price to pay for the protection newspeople are provided, and the privileges as citizens which they enjoy?

Why do the reporters and editors protest that actions like this curtail First Amendment rights? It is not that they are being denied freedom; rather they are being offered a chance to contribute to it.

Do journalists think they are more important, or that their calling is higher than that of the U.S. government and its officials?

Journalists' case

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field, see the CIA hiring policy as a threat to the two highest values of their profession, which happen also to be of enormous value to the country and its safety and well-being.

These are the belief of the world and of Americans that our press is as impartial and objective as it is possible to be, and the need of journalists to stand before sources and potential sources with a fair chance of being judged objective, trustworthy and deserving of confidential information.

The argument for the CIA-guaranteed independence of foreign journalists is parallel to the argument that journalists in this country give for the right to protect their news sources. For the first time around, for the short range, the government — CIA or the courts — might benefit from the information gathered by journalists. But as soon as it became apparent that some or all journalists are conduits, willing or unwilling, for information, that information will dry up or become deliberately twisted at the source.

It's a case of killing the goose that lays the golden egg.

A case of conflict

In spite of Turner's equation of the CIA with simple patriotism, it isn't that simple.

Asked whether his agency would inform the employer of the journalist about the extra-curricular CIA work, Turner answered that he hoped the journalist would communicate the facts himself, blow his own cover. No doubt the employer is expected to condone or encourage the moonlighting, again in the interests of patriotism, and to bless the employee and the extra income which the job brings.

But if the journalist has his cover blown by whatever chance, if he is identified as a CIA agent, both his professional reputation and that of his newspaper suffer. His life may be in danger besides.

And how about the very real conflict of interest that could occur if, in the course of his work, a journalist uncovered an instance of corruption or fraud in the CIA itself? To whom then would he owe loyalty? And would he, like Frank Snepp be bound by CIA rules not to talk, not to reveal what he had learned?

Role of the press

Newspeople are not trying to put themselves or their profession above the CIA. They recognize intelligence as a necessary arm of the government, which should be an instrument, not a shaper, of policy.

The American press is another arm of the democratic system, as strong in its own way, and sometimes as arrogant, as any other. Only to the extent that it supplies news and information which is credible because it is objective and thoroughly explored, is it effective.

With all due respect to Chief Turner, the country will be best served if the press and the CIA keep a wary, arms-