

CIA Saving Face In Files Probe?

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — CIA officials who investigated why an officer rifled House Assassinations Committee files last summer were interested primarily in getting their agency off the hook, informed sources say.

"They investigated it to get out of it themselves, not to find out whether somebody else was involved," one source said.

The Washington Post reported Monday that Regis Blahut, a CIA liaison officer assigned to help the committee, rummaged through a safe containing photos of President John Kennedy's autopsy.

CIA spokesman Herbert Hetu responded by saying Blahut had been dismissed for an error in judgment. Hetu said the agency was satisfied Blahut had gone through the files simply to satisfy his own curiosity.

Sources close to the committee disputed Hetu's assertions, saying someone outside the agency may have asked Blahut to look at the files.

One said there was overwhelming circumstantial evidence that more than curiosity was involved.

This source said Blahut wasn't authorized to be in the room containing the safe unless he was accompanied by a committee staffer.

The source said Blahut opened the safe, took a loose-leaf notebook out of a drawer, ripped a plastic case out of the notebook and took a picture out of the plastic case.

"He fled when he heard a noise, and then he lied about it," the source said.

"If it were just curiosity, why should you have to take photos out of an unused book in order to see them? Why not just look at them?"

The source said chief committee counsel Robert Blakey bluntly told CIA Director Stansfield Turner and Deputy Director Frank Carlucci the agency's investigation of the incident didn't go far enough.

Hetu denied this. He also denied the CIA had conducted an investigation aimed only at protecting itself.

One source, discussing the CIA investigation, said, "all they investigated was whether he had any connection with the agency" in rifling the files.

"They asked him on a polygraph (lie-detector test) whether he had any connection with the agency in doing what he did," the source said. "And he passed when he said he didn't have any connection."

"But they didn't ask whether someone else had authorized him to do it."

House

By George Lardner Jr.

Washington Post Staff Writer

The House Intelligence Committee started an investigation of a CIA officer's snooping last year in the offices of another congressional commit-

Members of the Intelligence Committee, which has oversight authority over the CIA, were informed of the inquiry last week by Chairman Edward Boland (D-Mass.). Committee staffers had already interviewed the CIA's director of security, Robert Ambino, about the incident following a report in The Washington Post.

The Post, quoting informed sources,

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Probing CIA

reported that the most sensitive files of the House Assassinations Committee had been rifled last summer and fingerprints on them traced to a CIA liaison officer assigned to the committee.

The assignment, it has since been learned, was made under a CIA program code-named "MH/Child," which sources described as encompassing a variety of so-called "babysitting" chores.

The agency dismissed the liaison officer in question, Regis T. Blahut, last August and then dropped the matter. In a memo to all CIA employees last week, CIA Director Stansfield Turner

'Babysitter'

took the position that Blahut had "acted alone and out of curiosity."

Since then, the CIA has also been insisting that Blahut, who had been employed by the agency's Office of Security, did not rifle the Assassinations Committee's files and did not even enter the safe where the files were kept.

However, the agency has refused to say what it thinks did happen, beyond describing it as—in the words of CIA spokesman Herbert Hetu—"something dumb."

According to informed sources, the incident took place one afternoon last July after an Assassinations Committee staffer had started inspecting

THIS LITTLE INCIDENT WAS NOT EVEN MENTIONED IN THE "FINAL" REPORT.

Who Rifled Files on JFK

some of the materials in a combination safe reserved for physical evidence of the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy.

Sources said he took what he wanted and left the room. According to one version, he left the safe door closed but unlocked; according to another, the safe door might have been left slightly ajar. In any case, sources said, when he returned, he found a book of Kennedy autopsy photos inside the safe in obvious disarray.

Blahut's fingerprints were found on the inside door of the safe. They were also found on one of the gruesome autopsy photos, which had been taken out of its plastic case, sources said.

The plastic case itself had been torn from its notebook binder.

The CIA's Hetu, however, declares that Blahut did not enter the safe to get the notebook.

Asked how it was then that Blahut's fingerprints were found on the inside of the safe door, Hetu said this must have happened when Blahut was "putting it [the book of photos] back in the safe."

Asked why Blahut would do that if he hadn't taken the book from the safe to begin with, the CIA spokesman said, "I don't know. Ask Blahut."

Hetu also declined to give the CIA's version of what happened, insisting that it would serve "no purpose."

Blahut, who reportedly failed C polygraph tests in several important respects concerning the incident, declined to comment. He has said this is an innocent explanation, but he refused to say what that is.

Sources said there were at least three personnel shifts and changes within the CIA's Office of Security following the incident last summer and the recent publicity over it, affecting, among others, Blahut's immediate supervisor. Hetu said there was no connection.

"We're satisfied that what he [Blahut] did, he did on his own," the CIA spokesman told a reporter. "None of the things [personnel shifts and reassignments] you've described had anything to do with that. . . . We're satisfied the guy did something dumb. He looked at a book he wasn't supposed to look at. And we fired him after we assured ourselves that he was asked [to do what he did] by anyone, either inside or outside the agency."

Sources close to the committee maintained that the CIA's investigation was aimed primarily at getting the agency off the hook and was not thorough enough to eliminate suspicions that more than "curiosity" might have been involved.

Blahut had been assigned to help the Assassinations Committee with the CIA files it needed in its inquiries. Sources described the MII/CIA project, under which the assignment came, as a sort of "babysitting" function that also includes escorting visitors to the CIA headquarters building at Langley.