

TV: A Middle-Class Couple Who Quit a Life of Spying for the C.I.A.

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

In "Spying for Uncle Sam," an NBC News documentary at 10 this evening, a former "case officer" for the Central Intelligence Agency tells not all but quite a lot in an effort to convey "the personal side of the equation," demanded by the spy business. Caleb Bach quit the agency in 1975, after 10 years on an international assignment that included Uruguay, Bolivia, Mexico and Portugal.

Mr. Bach and his wife, Claudia, recount for Edwin Newman, the program's reporter, their gradual disillusionment with a life based on trickery, deceit and manipulation. According to the script by Robert Rogers, the producer and director, "They decided to tell their story in the hope that it would help other Americans, including their former colleagues in the C.I.A., to understand that the steely nerved spy with a heart of gold exists mainly in movies and novels." Working for the C.I.A. pushed the couple to the

brink of divorce and Mr. Bach to thoughts of suicide.

There is much that is fascinating here, but also, in the manner of all public confessions, much that is troubling. The Bachs, now teaching in a small school in the mountains of Colorado, appear to be a sincere and sensitive couple. But incoherently cynical observers may wonder how they ever got involved with the C.I.A. in the first place and then, why it took them 10 years to decide to leave.

His own story will indicate that Mr. Bach was not the most reliable of spies. More than one of his cases in Bolivia "turned sour," and by the time of his last tour of duty, in Portugal, he was making openly stupid mistakes. Curiously enough, in the mid-1970's his name was legally changed from Ernest Barack for reasons of maintaining an espionage cover, but, evidently, he does not intend to go back to his original name. The details, however, of life and the

spying business reek of authenticity. Mrs. Bach, who is not on the agency payroll but works in partnership with her husband, tells of going to official functions to assess potential agents, arriving like two hawks ready to "home-in on a particular target." Their private life was inevitably compromised by their professional life. He says: "maybe the lowest moment in that sense was when we used the birthday party of my son as a means to invite some Soviet officials who lived around the corner to come to our house and participate in the event."

Mr. Rogers found the couple through a magazine article written by Mrs. Bach. He was impressed by the tone of the piece, finding it neither a polemic nor an apology. He contacted the Bachs, and what started out to be a fairly typical television "broad overview" of the C.I.A. became a profile of the simple couple. It is difficult to assess the implicit general thesis: that the dirty business of spying is imply incompatible with the middle-

class moral standards of the average American boy. But there is no doubt that Mr. Rogers has produced a program considerably more compelling than the average American documentary.

There is one further note, perhaps less troubling than puzzling. At the end of the hour NBC announces that the C.I.A. was allowed to preview the program in order to "protect current operations or personnel that might have been inadvertently compromised." The agency, NBC says, promised it would seek no changes in the program "and no changes were made." The conclusion happens to be amicable this time, but the precedent, no matter what the reasons, could be unfortunate within the context of independent journalism.