

I've Got a Secret

By Daniel Schorr

WASHINGTON—Whether the journalists who served the C.I.A. should be numbered in the dozens or the hundreds hinges, it has become clear, on how one reads the files. Groping through the thicket of C.I.A.-media relations, the House Intelligence Committee has come up with a distinction between "contacts" (voluntary) and "assets" (paid). Not so, say veteran intelligence officers. An "asset" could be anyone enlisted, even unwittingly, to provide assistance, or sometimes merely claimed as an asset by a self-aggrandizing field officer.

Various episodes in my career must, in that case, have qualified me for an "asset" listing, and I offer these as a cautionary tale:

1. In the late 1950's I was one of the group of CBS foreign correspondents who would dine, during year-end visits home, with high C.I.A. officials. My current amnesia about what was discussed may attest to their intelligence skills or to the quality and the quantity of the wine consumed.

2. Stationed in Moscow from 1955 through 1957, I met Americans on voluntary or assigned intelligence missions. For example, a visiting television executive took me to inspect a jamming transmitter, whose location he obviously knew. In May, 1957 I spent many late nights with C.I.A.-financed American students who had been sent to the Moscow Youth Festival as an antidote to the predominantly left-wing delegation.

3. Barred from the Soviet Union after being briefly arrested by the K.G.B., I was invited to lunch, in 1958, in the office of C.I.A. Director Allen Dulles. Afterwards, without asking my consent, he led me into a room for what turned out to be a debriefing by agency specialists. I had some qualms, and I rejected some questions, but generally I cooperated. Shortly thereafter, as I learned on obtaining parts of my C.I.A. file two decades later, some consideration was given to recruiting me into the C.I.A.'s ranks, although no offer was ever made.

4. In East European capitals, as a matter of practice, I sought out C.I.A. officers in American embassies as generally more knowledgeable and objective than their diplomat counterparts. Before leaving these countries I would share my observations—to check my findings and to maintain contacts useful for the future.

5. In West Germany, an important C.I.A. terrain in the 1960's, the West Berlin station chief, at whose home I dined, was invaluable in casing the Communists, and I discussed with him my impressions of visits to East Germany. In Bonn, Henry Pleasants, a station chief under very light cover, mixed easily with American correspondents at his sumptuous hilltop mansion. He seemed mainly to be trying to recruit us for discussions of music and for his wife's harpsichord recitals. Once I confronted him with the charge of using the C.I.A. as cover for a massive music operation.

6. With less overt C.I.A. officers in West Germany I entered occasionally into operational cooperation. For example, I accepted the offer of a filmed interview, in an obscure country retreat, with African students who had quit East European universities, bitter about Communist racism. It made an interesting story for CBS and undoubtedly an interesting propaganda point on American television for the C.I.A.

The C.I.A. also agreed to cooperate in the making of a television documentary about Communist espionage penetration of West Germany. West German counterintelligence officials to whom I was referred provided me with vivid case studies. In a secret C.I.A. installation near Frankfurt, I was able to film an interview with a recently-defected East German espionage officer, who recounted the running of spies in West Germany—one of them targeted at American Embassy secretaries. CBS gained a successful half-hour documentary; undoubtedly the C.I.A. gained in its aim of jarring the West Germans from their complacency about espionage.

7. As late as 1976, working on a television program for children called "What's the C.I.A. All About" I arranged with the agency to obtain U-2 spy plane equipment and photographs of missile sites in Cuba. I was aware that the C.I.A. was anxious to have its prouder moments recalled. The gadgetry was perfect for television however.

Was I a C.I.A. asset? Perhaps. Certainly the C.I.A. was an asset in my work. Journalism—particularly television journalism—requires various kinds of active cooperation. As long as my sole purpose was getting a story and my employers were aware of what I was doing, I felt ethically secure.

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