

Charles B. Seib Post 4/4/77

CIA's Media Connection

Slowly and painfully the truth comes out.

Back in 1973 we first learned that the Central Intelligence Agency used journalists as agents and news organizations as covers. The disclosure came from William Colby, then CIA director, who also said that he would cut back his agency's involvement with the press.

Since then there have been a series of similar revelations and promises of change. Details were different each time, but it was abundantly clear that the CIA was using the press and hated to give it up. As to specifics—the names of journalists who served the agency and news organizations that cooperated—the agency resolutely stonewalled. And the news business, usually so resourceful in digging out secrets, contented itself with pompous resolutions and expressions of dismay.

The other day, however, a tiny piece of the puzzle dropped into place. Richard S. Salant, president of CBS News, disclosed that in the 1950s and early 1960s the network worked closely with the CIA. It let agents monitor films and correspondents' reports that were not used on the air. Foreign correspondents who came home for year-end broadcasts were debriefed by Allen Dulles, the CIA director at the time. Salant also indicated that at least two of the network's employees had close ties with the agency—just how close is not clear.

As is customary in such matters, there is confusion over the extent and circumstances of the CIA-CBS cooperation. Sig Mickelson, who headed CBS News in the 1950s, said that it was a matter of "sharing information" and that it was done at the implied direction of CBS Board Chairman William S. Paley. A spokesman for Paley says that Paley doesn't remember it that way.

Both Mickelson and Salant, who says he ended the arrangement, have defended it as a by-product of the cold war. But the CIA's involvement with the news media was not just a cold-war phenomenon. It continued into the very recent past. We cannot be entirely sure that it isn't continuing now, abroad if not at home.

There is still much to be learned. Other pieces of the puzzle will fall into place, one by one, and eventually we

may get a picture of what went on and who was involved.

But what about the present? The best source these days is Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii), whose Senate Intelligence Committee appears to be trying to give CIA the close congressional oversight that has been lacking for so many years.

Inouye recently assured members of the American Society of Newspaper Editors that the CIA finally has stopped using American journalists. That merely means that the agency is honoring a pledge it made more than a year ago. Nevertheless, assuming there are no hidden gimmicks, it is welcome news.

Inouye's report on CIA involvement in foreign journalism was less heartening. He said that he hoped someday he would be able to say that no members

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of the press, foreign or domestic, were involved in U.S. intelligence activities, "but I am sorry I cannot do so this afternoon."

He did report, however, that "certain covert activities involving foreign press" have been ended and that he favored a flat prohibition against such activities. He also indicated that a majority of committee members agreed with him, which raises the strong possibility that Congress will act to end all CIA involvement with the press, foreign and domestic.

If that happens, and if Congress can make it stick, an embarrassing double standard that has been tolerated by the American news business will end.

While nearly all American journalists would agree that espionage and U.S. journalism should not be mixed, they have been much less disturbed by CIA meddling with foreign media. At the same time, the CIA, while surrendering—ever so slowly—its involvement with the American media, has insisted that it must retain the option of manipulating the press abroad.

So for Americans to profess a belief in human rights and yet tolerate the corruption of the press of other countries by an agency of the U.S. government could only be seen, around the world, as the grossest hypocrisy. And that is what it would be.