



SOUGHT OUT

CIA's Conein & Dan Ellsberg in Vietnam

CITYSKETCH: AN AFTERNOON WITH THE CIA'S EX-INDISPENSABLE MAN

To author David Halberstam, writing in *The Best and the Brightest*, Lucien Conein was like "someone sprung to life from a pulp adventure," a swash-buckling, irreverent CIA agent who roamed South Vietnam like an angry bear. To former Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Conein was "the indispensable man," a vital pipeline between his embassy and the

South Vietnamese generals who plotted the critical overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963.

"Lucien Conein," says the man himself, tapping his two remaining right hand fingers against a tumbler of Chivas Regal, "the little time Lucien Conein spent on the world stage is unimportant."

Conein is a stout man, with soft, white hair combed away from a deeply-lined face. Over a five-hour lunch of expensive scotch and a hamburger ("hold the bun"), *The Indispensable Man* revealed in his memories (he was forced to retire from the CIA in 1968) and spoke apprehensively about a biography being written by *New Republic* foreign editor, Stanley Karnow.

Conein likes to tell stories. He remembers, for example, rescuing former State Department employe Daniel Ellsberg from some woman trouble in Saigon. Apparently Ellsberg got in some hot water for romancing the mistress of a Mafia member. (Ellsberg recalls the incident but says Conein "enlarges the effectiveness of his role" in saving him from death at the hand of a jealous Corsican.) Then Conein recalls his days with the French Resistance and follows those yarns up with tales of the talented women who frequented the bars and alleys of the Vietnam he knew.

But it is not easy to relax with or to believe in a man who has spent most of his life as an expert in "disinformation," and Conein knows it. Some stories are preceded by a sworn, "Now this is the

truth, honestly, but you can't print this" and others are begun even more earnestly: "Now, this one is the double truth, Scout's honor, the double truth." Then, just as suddenly Conein will warn, "Don't believe anything I tell you, I'm an expert liar, you know, I've been doing it all my life."

The public first learned of Conein when the Supreme Court cleared the continued newspaper publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971. Conein woke to find his name woven throughout New York Times stories that detailed the military overthrow of the unpopular regime. In that watershed coup—which the secret Pentagon study said offered the United States a rare chance to reconsider and perhaps withdraw from its burgeoning role in Southeast Asia—Conein was the American whom the rebellious generals trusted with their plots. He was the one they sought out when they needed assurances that the U.S. would not interfere with their coup. Reprinted cables detailed the meetings Conein had held in fluent French with the coup leaders.

By mid-day, Conein says, a swarm of reporters had descended on his McLean home. Conein called his former employer and the CIA suggested he take a vacation. A CIA man he met that afternoon at a local bowling alley handed him a fat envelope which Conein assumed was stuffed with \$100 bills. When he got home, he counted 25 bills. Except they were all twenties.

"What do you expect me to do," Conein says he wrote in a note returning the money, "spend a weekend in a Marriott?" Weekends at a Marriott are not in the style of Conein, who is kept in well-tailored suits with the help of his present \$25,000-a-year salary as chief of the intelligence collection branch of the Drug Enforcement Administration.

As the afternoon grew long, the lament of Lucien Conein began to unfold. He recalled decades of living a false life, not being able to apply for mortgages like other people who hold public jobs, not being able to tell his children exactly what he did for a living, always lying and wondering when one

lie would stumble over another.

And then there is the book. Stanley Karnow says he intends to use Conein as "a prototype of his kind and his time." Conein said he talked into Karnow's tape recorder (for 40 hours last spring) because he thought the book was going to include reminiscences of many former agents. Karnow admits that was his original idea, but using Conein as a focal point for the entire book began to make sense. He says he offered Conein half the advance, Conein agreed, but later demanded control over the manuscript. That is the sticking point and Conein has spent \$4,000 in lawyer's fees and talked with CIA director William Colby—only to learn he can probably do nothing to thwart publication.

"The people who I worked with since 1943 are the real heroes," says Conein earnestly. "I have friends who lost their lives in this racket, they're the important people."

Then, as the after-work set began filing into The Class Reunion, a sleek H Street bar, the house bought a round for Conein's table and The Indispensable Man said: "The only thing that made me important was the Pentagon Papers. I'm a damn fraud. I haven't told the truth to anybody, including Karnow. I was just a flash in the pan for 24 hours; I haven't told the truth to anybody." ■