

the seat of government

The Fourth Estate As the Fourth Branch

by Judith Coburn and Geoffrey Cowan

In mid-October, Washington Post Pentagon reporter George Wilson learned of charges by two Army intelligence officers that men being trained for Operation Phoenix, the top-secret CIA and Army intelligence program to locate and dispose of the NLF civilian cadre, have been instructed in torture and assassination techniques. A good reporter whose genuine misgivings about the war place him at odds with many of his close friends in the military, Wilson tracked down the story of Phoenix, and the explosive document filed in U. S. District Court by Baltimore lawyer William Zinman on behalf

of the two Army lieutenants, Michael Cohn and Francis Reitemeyer. One afternoon Wilson called Zinman to report that the Post would be printing the story on the front page that Sunday.

The Operation Phoenix expose never appeared in the Washington Post. It was killed by consensus in a special meeting of Post editors. "As a reporter here I'm a conveyor belt and don't make the decisions," Wilson later told us. National news editor Peter Silberman last week explained how the decision was made. "A group of editors got together, read it, discussed it with George, and on the basis of a consensus, decided. This is routine on any exclusive story which involves an issue which could be sensitive, from divorce suits to Mylai."

Although in this case the Post editors may have had doubts about the validity of the charges against the Pentagon, their decisions may also have been affected by a concern for

national security. Editors of national newspapers occasionally openly discuss this consideration—the New York Times decision to downplay the Bay of Pigs story is a classic example. There are others. In "The Working Press" Times science editor Walter Sullivan recounts how he and Times military affairs editor Hanson Baldwin sat on the story of America's secret nuclear test series, Project Argus, for eight months in the late 1950s, since they were afraid that "publication of the plan in advance might force cancellation of the experiment."

Editors of the country's major newspapers live in dread of stories which will be considered irresponsible. This is especially true of the editors of the New York Times and the Washington Post, who know that most major national decision makers read and act on the information contained in their news columns. In their view, though many of them would deny it, the press is the fourth branch of government: information source, confidant, friendly critic. Their stake in the orderly interchange of news and policy is as great as that of Patrick Buchanan, the right-wing former editorial page writer for the St. Louis Globe-Democrat who selects and edits President Nixon's morning reading.

Tom Wicker discussed the "objectivity" trap with us in his executive-style Washington office a few weeks ago. "Until Tet no daily journalist really questioned the war or used his own logic to examine it. It was partly due to the nature of the news approach to journalism. You interview generals, go to background briefings, talk to some sources in State and Defense, and then, if what they're saying conforms to what you believe, you pass along what they tell you unchallenged. You can do that honorably by the tenets of the profession—that's considered objectivity—but the result is to propagate the administration's view."

The Post/Times treatment of Operation Phoenix, and even of the Mylai massacre, demonstrates the editorial process by which the press has failed the country in recent years.

When George Wilson first interviewed Pentagon officials about the Operation Phoenix story, they denied the two

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short-sightedness of...

lieutenants' charge that they were taught to murder and to use torture techniques on suspects where necessary. The Army claimed to have an affidavit signed by one of the officers stating that he had not been so instructed, and that he had learned the stories which he recounted from articles in the Wall Street Journal. Though the Army refused to show Wilson the affidavit, its reported existence was enough to convince the Post's editors not to run the story.

Had they studied it more closely, however, the Post editors might have found the Army story somewhat suspicious. The affidavit was signed on December 6, two months before the officers' story was introduced in Baltimore District Court, while both officers were still under military discipline. The Army had learned that Lieutenant Reitemeyer had told a girl friend about the program at a cocktail party. Very likely under the threat of a court martial for discussing classified military information, Reitemeyer agreed to sign the disclaimer.

One other fact might have made Post editors suspicious. No articles in the Wall Street Journal have discussed the specific practices which Reitemeyer described in the statement filed with the District Court.

The Post could have run a balanced article, including the Army's refutation, or they could have told Wilson to spend a couple of weeks concentrating on what was obviously a sensational story. It did neither. The Post's first mention of the charges against Operation Phoenix was the Baltimore A. P. account filed two days after our story appeared in The Voice ("Training for Terror: A Deliberate Policy?", December 11). (The A. P. story also ran in the New York Post.) The first story filed by Wilson appeared the following day: it described the Army's explanation of the facts at a press conference held in response to inquiries by The Voice and other reporters.

As Wicker pointed out to us, editors tend to believe government officials and to distrust controversial stories which can't be officially

confirmed.

When the A. P. sent out a story in early September saying that the Army had charged a lieutenant with multiple murders in Vietnam, the story was buried by its subscribers, and apparently not one reporter bothered to call the Army for details. When free-lance writer Seymour Hersh later developed his

ground-breaking expose of the Myla massacres, his story was irrefutable since it was based on the Army's own charges against Calley. Nevertheless, both Life and Look turned the story down, and it reached the front pages of America only through the entrepreneurial efforts of Dispatch News Service, a group which sells stories which the establishment press hasn't had the imagination or independence to track down. Rather than running Hersh's story (as did numerous well-known dailies including the San Francisco Chronicle, the Chicago Sun-Times, and all of the Knight papers), the Times and Post toned the first massacre story way down, basing their reports on the Pentagon's response to Hersh's story.

On Sunday, November 30, 1969, James Reston told Times readers that the government managed to keep the Song My massacre quiet "until it was forced into national attention by press and television." No thanks to the Times—or to the networks for that matter, Hersh's original story appeared on November 13, but the networks, the Post, and the Times all failed to dig into the story or publicize it in a major way until the massacre became a scandal in Europe where responsible media such as the London Times had given the story the kind of three-deck headline play it deserved. As Clifton Daniel, then managing editor of the New York Times, told the World Press Institute in discussing the coverage of the Bay of Pigs, "Times editors now say that the change in play, not eliminating the reference to the imminence of the invasion, was the important thing done that night." "It was important because a multi-column head in this paper means so much," Daniel quotes Times news editor

Low Jordan as saying.

On December 4, the Washington Post printed a devastating post-Mylai column by editorial page writer Coleman McCarthy entitled "Wartime 'Murder' and the Moral Law." "The moral problem of this killing is that many more than the accused soldiers are involved," he wrote. "Implicated in a deeper way is the society which either actively supported their presence in Vietnam or passively approved of it by their silence."

Perhaps no institution so deserves to be indicted for society's active or passive support of the war as Coleman McCarthy's own employer. As President Johnson escalated the war, the Post editorial page played cheerleader to official Washington, praising and justifying each new troop increase.

The Post's editorials were not the random musings of neutral observers. They represented the official policy of a newspaper whose executives were connected to the Administration in power, as intimately as are the leaders of any party newspaper in Europe. According to Theodore White's account, it was the Washington Post's owner-publisher, the late Philip Graham, who arranged for Lyndon Johnson to serve as John Kennedy's running mate in 1960. Johnson also named John Hayes, vice-president of the Washington Post Company, to serve as ambassador to Switzerland. Most important, Johnson named the Post's editor, Russell Wiggins, to serve as his last ambassador to the United Nations. What makes this chain of appointments appear

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still less innocent is the fact that most of the pro-administration Vietnam editorials had been written by Wiggins.

In an effort to understand the way Post editorial policy is formulated, a few weeks ago we

spent several hours with Philip Geylin, who took the editorial page over from Wiggins, and Meg Greenfield, formerly of the Reporter magazine, who is now deputy editorial page editor.

Geylin is a charming and thoughtful foreign policy expert, formerly with the Wall Street Journal. His own current doubts about the war are, perhaps best summarized in an uncharacteristically blunt

sentence from an otherwise pro-administration editorial written on the eve of the first Moratorium. "The tragedy is that it is late—that there were no vigilantes in or out of government three or four years ago organizing a Vietnam Moratorium."

Post editorial policy is made by Geylin and the 10 members of his staff each morning at a free-wheeling editorial conference where editorials are assigned and

positions debated. According to Geylin, the case for immediate withdrawal is presented regularly at these meetings by at least two members of the editorial board.

Geylin told us: "The most extreme view on the right of the editorial board doesn't have to do with the war but with the role of the newspaper in complicating the decision-making process—that dissent may actually prolong the war. You must consider not

what's the right thing to say but what's the most useful thing to say. This is 'the awesome burden' syndrome, that it's difficult enough for the President to make policy decisions without newspapers complicating the process. This is especially true when he is doing something you approve of, like withdrawing troops. Then you support the positive side of his program. In

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our editorial on the November 3 speech, for example, we pointed out that the speech made two good points."

While Geylin says he doesn't agree with "the awesome burden" analysis, he drafted the editorial supporting the November 3 speech. He also wrote the Post's October 12 editorial on the Moratorium which managed to interpret that already apparently mammoth anti-war demonstration as "less a destructive exercise in dissent or a sign of dangerous division than a show of support and a useful reinforcement of the President."

The problem with editorials affected by "the awesome burden" syndrome is that they may emerge as double-think. Due to a mixture of motives—some of them perhaps noble—columnists and editorial writers want to reinforce the administration's best tendencies and avoid the kind of heavy criticism which

might discredit them in the eyes of top policy makers. With some embarrassment, Tom Wicker directed our attention to an example of this genre, a column he wrote on July 29, 1965, the day following President Johnson's announcement of what many observers consider the most significant escalation of the war. The President's announcement of his "dispatch of 50,000 more troops to South Vietnam," he wrote, "was as important for what he did not do as for what he did. He did not commit the United States to an unlimited ground war in South Vietnam."

When Vice-President Agnew attacked the Eastern media establishment for its liberal perspective, liberal media and politicians charged that he was encouraging censorship. Perhaps he was, but the deeper truth is that the media is censored already—self-censored by a sense of its proper role in the process of government. There are undoubtedly reporters on the Times and the Post who today are protecting Nixon administration members and projects just as the Times reporters protected Project Argus in 1959. The Vice-President himself has benefited from the press's sense of decorum. At meetings not unlike the one where the Post decided not to expose Operation Phoenix, editors last spring decided to ignore the story of Kim Agnew's involvement in a pot-smoking incident at the National Cathedral School, for which several of her schoolmates were suspended.

The editorial pages of the major dailies, which could do so much to legitimize new programs

and ideas—and to de-legitimize other ideas and personalities—instead tend to restrict the public imagination. Editorial writers never discuss issues like war crimes trials, the appeal of the Black Panthers to ghetto teenagers, or the possibility that the NLF *should* win the war, because in the world where they all speak to each other these are not legitimate issues to think about. Some perspectives (both left and right) gain legitimacy as they bubble up through the radical press and new political parties, but who can say how many important insights never are considered, or how much of society is destroyed while the establishment press waits for positions to gain their own legitimacy.

Tom Wicker points out that most doves in the press, like others in the establishment, didn't really begin to question the war until it became clear that it wasn't working. He now places much of the blame on "the myth of objectivity," and is convinced that "the classic approach of reporters—who interview leaders, report what they say, and think that they have done their journalistic duty—doesn't work in complicated situations."

Partly in response to the concerns Wicker cites, a "new journalism" has been explored by some papers which try to provide deeper coverage of complex issues by relaxing some of the traditional rules about style, story length, and play. But these accounts generally continue to suffer from the journalists' basic consensus on values and legitimacy, blindsers on the press which are more effective than any publisher's or administration's efforts at censorship could ever hope to be.

On December 15, the Times ran an absorbing piece on the multi-dimensional career of Herbert Itkin. It included this sentence: "The CIA has scattered throughout the country covert agents and 'contract' employees—men and women who conduct legitimate law practices, professions, and businesses, who also are paid and employed on a regular basis by the CIA."

Is that all the Times is going to find out about this network in this here open society?