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The 'Revealing' of Information on TV

By now, I suppose, it is generally known that Col. Alexander Butterfield, the man who truthfully answered Ervin committee questions about the White House tapes, was not a CIA agent in the White House, as alleged one day last summer on the CBS morning news at the instigation of Daniel Schorr.

What people don't know is that Daniel Schorr refuses to admit responsibility in the matter. Schorr demands a written apology from me for saying that he "revealed" this charge, and his complaint sends me scurrying to the record.

(Ordinarily, arguments among newsmen as to who is wrong and who is right deserve the categorization of T.S. Eliot: "In the room the women come and go, talking of Michaelangelo.") But Schorr's complaint seems to me of general interest because of the peculiarities of television news. First, television news is immensely powerful. A story on television is to a newspaper story as dynamite is to a firecracker. Second, because once shown, the story is gone. You can't refer to it, pull it out of your wallet and show it to a friend. After you see it, you're not sure you saw it. It's easy for television newsmen to say, "That's not quite what I said."

But back to Schorr. He says I erred in a recent column when I accused him of "revealing" that Butterfield was a CIA agent in the White House. He didn't "reveal" it, Schorr says. A man named Col. Fletcher Prouty "revealed" it.

But who put Prouty on the air? Let me give you the record of the broadcast.

Bruce Morton: "On that CIA story, Daniel Schorr is with us in the studio this morning with something new. Dan."

Schorr: "Bruce, with me at this early hour, and I'm grateful to him for coming in at this early hour, is retired Air Force Col. Fletcher Prouty We have a document from the CIA's inspector General of 1973 which says that for many years the CIA has detailed employees to the immediate office of the White House Can I ask you of someone who was in the immediate office in the White House, whose CIA background is not generally known?"

Prouty: "I think the description would fit Alexander Butterfield."

Schorr then goes on to question Prouty, referring to Butterfield as "a CIA man." Here are examples:

Schorr: "Col. Prouty, I guess you have no way of knowing whether President Nixon knew Alexander Butterfield, who worked in his office, was a CIA man?"

Prouty: "I think that's one of the big problems. I would doubt Nixon or anybody else really knew it."

Schorr: ". . . Charles Colson says that President Nixon did not know that Butterfield or anybody else in his immediate

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office worked for the CIA although Colson says that after a while—after the tape incident—he began to suspect."

Now, who "revealed" that Butterfield was the CIA man? Could Prouty have walked in cold to CBS and gone on the air? Could you? The fact is that Daniel Schorr "revealed" it, first by putting Prouty on: "Daniel Schorr with something new." Second, by entering into a serious discussion with Prouty about Butterfield's work as a plant or agent in the White House.

I don't fault Dan Schorr, a good reporter, for being human and thus subject to error, though if he had read Prouty's book in which it is suggested that CIA runs the country, he might have been suspicious.

But I hope Schorr's refusal to admit a mistake is not a portent of what is to come. If it is, television news, like newspaper gossip columns, can give broadside to the wildest allegations with the alibi that "I didn't say it." Where then shall we look for fact?