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Q and A

Snepp Tells Of His War With the CIA

Frank Snepp, who joined the CIA in 1968, wrote "A Decent Interval," which describes the final days of the U.S. involvement in South Vietnam. He has since been sued by the federal government as a result of that book. Snepp was interviewed by Washington Star Staff Writer David Pike.

Question: The Justice Department has sued you, claiming that you broke a contract with the CIA by publishing "A Decent Interval" without agency approval. Did you break a contract?

Snepp: I think the suit raises a number of very important questions, most particularly whether or not the secrecy agreement is a contract. I don't think it is, and I think that for a number of reasons. When any recruit joins the agency, he is almost routinely misled about what he is getting into. My first day on the job in 1968, I asked if the agency was ever involved in assassinations or other nefarious activities. I asked this of a briefing officer at my induction and was told in great honesty that the agency didn't engage in such activities. On this basis, I signed the secrecy agreement. Well, what kind of contract can be considered valid when one of the signatories is drawn into it under such false pretenses? In my particular case, I think that if anyone has been guilty of violating any contractual ties that might have existed between me and the CIA, it is the agency, and not I.

Q: Why?

A: When I came back from Vietnam, I did go to various agency officials, including the inspector general who, under the secrecy agreement I signed, is obligated to take up any complaints. Well, the inspector general turned me away and everybody else turned me away. And I maintain that in turning me away the agency abrogated the secrecy agreement itself. Secrecy agreements

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can't be divisible. They can't apply simply to one party and not to the other. They can't apply merely to me and not to the agency. The agency has obligations under it, and very cleverly the administration and (CIA Director) Admiral (Stansfield) Turner have focused attention only on the obligation of such people as myself. The agency does have a very important duty, and that is to make sure that grievances are at least investigated; that they are acted upon if they prove to be valid. And they didn't do so in my case. Finally, I think if the secrecy agreement is going to be meaningful at all, it has to apply to everybody in the agency who pledges to abide by it.

Q: You don't think it has?

A: This gets into the whole question of whether or not senior CIA officials have the right to leak information to protect their reputations. They sign secrecy agreements, too, and logically they should be prevented from going to the press and painting their rosy picture of their own role in a particular crisis: CIA Director Colby did this in the wake of Saigon. So did my immediate boss, CIA station chief in Saigon Tom Polgar. When he was evacuated he promptly briefed the press, gave an extensive press conference in which he painted himself as hero to Ambassador (Graham) Martin's villain. He was abusing his secrecy, he was overstepping it. I do not believe that the government has the right to punish only those middle-level subordinates — if you will — like myself, and ignore those at the top like Colby, like Polgar, who did the same thing that I'm being accused of having done, which is to have tried to get the story on the record. I think my book is not the be-all and end-all, it's not the final account of Saigon's final days, but it should contribute to the public debate.

Q: You seem to be saying that if they are right to do that you are right, too. Aren't you also saying that if they are wrong to do it, you are wrong, too?

A: You see, I think the Vietnam War was always an old man's war and a young man's tragedy. The old men rationalized their way into it, then rationalized their way out of it. And we in the middle echelons were left to betray the Vietnamese, who had come to depend on the United States and believe in U.S. assurances. The old men went off to their retreats in Italy and tried to forget what had taken place. The young men were left with the memory of agents they had worked next to from beginning to end. They were haunted by the visions of the final days because they were out on the courtyard of the embassy. They were at Tan Son Nhut and they saw what betrayal meant face-to-face. I think they should be heard from and deserve to be heard from. And if they can't be heard from, then I think that we have entered a very dangerous time in our history and I think my case — I hope — will serve just in a small way to shift direction. That's why I'm anxious to get on with it.

Q: What will happen if you can't get on with it, if you lose the case with the Justice Department, and there is an injunction against speaking out?

A: Well, I think an awful precedent will be set. The government will have established its right, and the CIA will have established its right to punish anybody for merely trying to bring the truth to the public without checking that version with the CIA's censors, regardless of any secrecy is involved, whether any secrets are revealed.

Q: Do you reveal any secrets?

A: Absolutely not. And the government has not alleged that I revealed any secrets. In the Pentagon Papers case, the Supreme Court ruled that prior restraint was permissible only when publication might cause immediate or grave harm to national security. In the (Victor) Marchetti case involving another former CIA employee who published a book, or who tried to publish a book without approval, the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that although the CIA had the right to censor classified material in the author's manuscript, it did not have the right to excise unclassified material. Based on those precedents, one would suppose that the publication of unclassified material would not be punishable. The Carter White House and the Justice Department do not make that assumption. They are going way beyond the Pentagon Papers precedent and the Marchetti precedent and are seeking to punish me for having published unclassified material, an incredible extension of the government's assault on the 1st Amendment.

Q: When you were writing the book, you wrote it in secret assuming that there would be reaction from the CIA. Why did you go ahead and write it anyway?

A: Because I thought it was a matter of honor. I tried to go through the system. I tried to prompt an internal report on the evacuation and I had been turned away. I felt a very great obligation to a principle that is supposed to be meaningful for the CIA, and that is truth itself. The only thing that distinguishes the CIA from the Mafia or any criminal outlet is its commitment to getting the truth to Washington and to acknowledging the truth to itself. In the wake of Saigon's collapse, the CIA tried to cover reality with a lie. In my book I have attempted to strip away the camouflage that agency officials attempted to erect to protect themselves. I feel that nobody who believes in the integrity of the agency and in its absolute obligation to the truth could do otherwise. I thought that it was very important for me to emphasize to the agency itself that somebody in the ranks still believed that the agency should honor the principle of truth, and that the legend on the wall of the CIA is still important. It's a biblical quoting: "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." The agency was moving away from that principle after Saigon's collapse, as it has often done in other cases. But this was the time to put your foot down.

Q: Do you think your book has been a success so far in getting some public discussion, public debate of the whole question?

A: I think it has been successful in a certain sense. It has caused the public to address what was a very sordid episode in our involvement in Vietnam. It is a very important episode because every important CIA official — every state Department officer who is now on the way up in the State Department did service in Vietnam. And the scruples they learned there, particularly in the final days, are going to be with us for a long time to come. Unless the public knows what went on there, and unless the State Department and the CIA are reminded of what went wrong there, there is always a possibility we will have a replay, hopefully in miniature. I think the public and the State Department and CIA cannot deny what took place there. I am very discouraged, though, with the agency's reaction, Turner's reaction and now with the White House's reaction. President Carter the other day in a press conference said that I had not contributed anything to improving the bureaucracy, presumably the agency. I think that's an appalling comment, since after all the agency should be committed to some measure of truth. That's what I was trying to bring on to it.