The Washington merry-go-round

FP art 6-1-75

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WASHINGTON — In the Soviet Union, American newsmen are watched wherever they go. TV correspondents must take along an official censor on filming trips. Even the office help in U.S. news bureaus allegedly are required to report to KGB.

In this country, Soviet newsmen are free to travel virtually where they wish. They have the same access as other newsmen to government premises. They can interview anyone who will talk to them. Their films are shipped, uncensored, to Moscow.

Yet secret files identify at least three Soviet newsmen as veteran KGB agents. The newspaper Izvestia's Washington correspondents, Stanislav Kondrashov and Yuri Barsukov, actually run an espionage operation, according to the files.

The files also claim that Vissarion Sisnev, correspondent for the Soviet labor newspaper Trud, is an outright KGB agent. Official sources tell us that other KGB men almost certainly pose as correspondents for the Communist party paper Pravda, the Soviet news agency Tass and Moscow radio-TV.

Izvestia's busy Barsukov is a human vacuum cleaner who collects press releases, congressional reports, military and foreign policy documents and every scrap of paper he can find on Capitol Hill.

His heavily spectacled sidekick, Kondrashov, moves ponderously from office to office with the grim determination of a KGB interrogator.

Together with Sisnev, they have an unparalleled outpost on Capitol Hill for espionage. Kondrashov is accredited to the congressional press galleries, Barsukov, back in Washington on a second tour, soon will be.

This accreditation gives them special access to information, including off-the-record-briefings. They also share indirectly in the protection of the First Amendment. They develop friendships on Capitol Hill, making it awkward for federal authorities to monitor their activities.

The late FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover, for example, didn't want his agents tracking suspects around the corridors of Congress. However, he made some quiet exceptions to the rule and to this day, the FBI keeps known KGB operatives under surveillance on Capitol Hill.

The FBI has been hampered, nevertheless, by a tight budget. Director Clarence Kelley has testified more funds are needed to keep up with all the Soviet representatives now in the country — double the number 10 years ago.

Footnote: only one of the three KGB journalists returned our calls. Yuri Barskukov, in response to our inquiry about his KGB affiliation, said: "I couldn't answer that stupid question." Asked whether he would like to deny the charge, he growled: "I won't answer any more," and he hung up. A Soviet embassy spokesman said he had no knowledge that the three Soviet newsmen were intelligence agents.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS: One of the world's strangest friendships has developed between Libyan strongman Muammar el-Qaddafi and Ugandan President Idi Amin. They are, in the judgment of diplomats, a couple of mad hatters.

Colonel Qaddafi passes out weapons to terrorists while he seeks nuclear bombs for his own arsenal. Presumably, he would bomb Israel if he could get his hands on the nuclear wherewithal. But this is by no means certain. He also has made dire threats against his own Arab brothers, including Egypt's President Sadat and Jordan's King Hussein.

The irrepressible Amin is gaining notoriety as one of history's most infamous buffoons and thugs. Over the years, he has murdered 90,000 political opponents. The latest to land on his execution list is a British lecturer who called Amin a "village tyrant" in an unpublished manuscript.

The fat Amin and skinny Qaddafi get together occasionally to exchange rhetoric about the enemies they are going to destroy. Only last month, Amin ventured to Tripoli where the Laurel-and-Hardy pair reaffirmed their "strong brotherly relations."

Diplomatic insiders suspect, however, that Qaddafi is stringing Amin along. Three years ago, say our sources, Qaddafi talked Amin into breaking relations with Israel in exchange for a promise of weapons. Amin is still waiting for his guns.

He hasn't lost his faith, however, in his Libyan friend. During a confrontation the other day with Britain's Lt. Gen. Sir Chandos Blair, Amin suddenly began shouting excitedly to his ministers: "Alert the army! Alert the air force! Call Lybia and tell Lybia to begin sending airplanes here!"

Qaddafi sent no airplanes. He has promised, however, to build some hospitals in Uganda. But insiders believe the African dictator will get his hospitals at about the same time he gets his airplanes.