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Journalism and the CIA

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Watergate reporter Carl Bernstein has performed the laborious but useful job of assembling all the known information, plus some new, unknown facts, on journalism's cooperation with the CIA. All in all, Bernstein reports in an upcoming issue of "Rolling Stone," the agency files contain the names of 400 journalists who cooperated with the great haunted house of a headquarters in Langley.

There appears to have been a great variety in what services these people performed. A minority were on the CIA payroll and can be regarded as full-time employees; others seemed to have swapped information with the agency as reporters will do with news

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sources, and some appeared to have gotten into the files merely by having a drink with an agent and chit-chatting about some country they'd just visited.

A lot of people in journalism and out think it is wrong to have doubled as a reporter and a CIA agent. They don't buy former syndicated columnist Joe Alsop, whom Bernstein quotes as saying, "I'm proud they asked me and proud to have done it. The notion that a newspaperman doesn't have a duty to his country is perfect . . ."

Does that duty include taking money from an employer, and ostensibly giving loyalty and first preference to an employer, while actually doing the bidding of a clandestine government agency? Does the duty of citizenship go to serving two masters, one public and one secret?

But who are the two masters? When Bernstein asked William Colby about this, the former CIA director said, "Let's not pick on some poor reporters, for God's sake. Let's go to the managements. They were witting."

Print and broadcast journalism's prestige corporations seem to have been the most heavily involved—The New York Times, CBS, and Time-Life, the Eastern, liberal establishment media. With the exception of the Copley newspaper chain, the most active and enthusiastic support for the use of news organizations as intelligence, and even espionage, auxiliaries appears centered in outfits regarded as liberal. While Time, and to a lesser extent Newsweek, cooperated with the CIA, it was the right-wing U.S. News and World Report that ordered its staff to have nothing to do with the agency.

Thus with occasional exceptions the reporters stand innocent of playing a double game with their bosses. Even

though The Louisville Courier-Journal is the only news company that has gone completely public about its role in these matters (CBS has done so to some degree, but how much is disputed), enough evidence now exists to suggest that, if there has been dishonesty practiced, it's between the management of the news companies and the public, their customers. The explicit pledge news corporations make is that the news and opinion which they print may be wrong but is their own.

Has that been true with foreign news or is the collaboration between the government and news executives in the gathering of intelligence also reflected in decisions about what to print and what not to print and how to slant it? The oft-told and true story of how The New York Times suppressed an article telling of the then-upcoming Bay of Pigs operation has always been offered as a one-of-a-kind, extraordinary incident, precipitated by a telephone call from President Kennedy, no less. Now, how many years later, we learn from Bernstein that the late Arthur Hays Sulzberger, long-time New York Times publisher, promised Eisenhower's Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, that none of the newspaper's employees would be allowed to accept an invitation to visit Red China. When an invitation did come, the publisher's nephew and foreign affairs writer, C. L. Sulzberger, was forbidden to accept it. "It was 17 years before another Times correspondent was invited," Sulzberger told Bernstein.

Almost a generation, during which that newspaper, the most influential organ in American journalism, contributed to the general public impression that Red China was a faceless, hostile ant hill anxious to seal itself off and stew in its animosity toward America. What, then, is the difference in the relationship of The New York Times to foreign policy officers of the United States government and that of Pravda to the commissariat of foreign affairs in Moscow? To Americanize, the difference is that we know the editors of Pravda are subservient and not permitted to exercise their independent judgment, if they have any. The Times, however, as the standard-maker of American journalism, has repeatedly asserted it's not the official voice of the orthodoxies of power.

So the question now arises, if we look back over the decades of bipartisan foreign policy, the decades of absence of debate, who lied? Was it only Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon? It never was very plausible that a President with a few collaborators could have pulled such a thing off by his lonesome.