

How CIA Agents Suffer From Secrecy



By Bill Perkins — The Washington Post

By Joseph Burkholder Smith

TWENTY-FIFTH college reunions are great occasions for letting the world know how well you've done, and mine was no exception. All my old classmates, it seemed, had become assistant secretaries of state or vice presidents of General Motors or had acquired some equally impressive title. So it was a little embarrassing when they'd ask me what I was up to.

Not that I hadn't done well myself — I was at the time fairly high up in the Central Intelligence Agency. But I wasn't allowed to say that, so when they asked, I had to mumble something vague about being a civilian employee at Patrick Air Force base, an excuse that, I could tell, conjured up images of genteel failure (too much drinking, perhaps) in the people who heard it.

Not being able to impress my old classmates was a small wound, but it symbolizes an important problem for CIA agents. We live in a society where lots of people plan their lives so as to accumulate the greatest possible number of credentials of the sort that will wow their peers at reunions and similar moments. These credentials give many Americans a sense of identity and of security. CIA people are by no means immune to the desire to impress people with credentials, but their jobs are directly at odds with that urge. In that way and several others, we in the CIA have been deprived of the normal ego supports of the American life of our time, and how we dealt with (and didn't deal with) their absence from our lives has had something to do with how our agency has (and hasn't done) its job.

It wasn't just our status among our peers that suffered as a result of our work. Normal family life was a victim too. The CIA's Clandestine Services division has for years had the highest divorce rate of any organization in the government. Part of the reason is that recruits of my generation of clandestine operators were instructed never to tell their wives what they were really doing. "Just say it's a question of national security," they told us when we had to take one of our frequent absences from home.

Of course, many men also discovered quickly what an improvement that line was over the old "working late at the office" routine and took advantage of it. Still, most of the marital problems came not from philandering but from the unspectacular, bitter toll that living under cover takes on people. Officers with good marriages might tell their wives in general terms what kind of work keeps them out at night, but they have to insist that the wives give no hint. The first thing a CIA wife learns is never to ask another woman what her husband does, for fear she will be asked the same question.

CIA wives also have to join their husbands in keeping their children in the dark. When schools have programs in which the kids' fathers tell their classes about their fascinating work, she has to help invent reasons why her child can't volunteer his father's participation. When the son wants to visit his father's office, the way his friends do, she must try to ease his terrible feeling of rejection when his father tells

him no. This kind of travail makes many women wonder if it's worth the effort.

Talking to Yourself

IF A CIA AGENT is stationed in Washington, he has to get used to being asked at every party, by every stranger he meets, "What do you do?" Personal qualities like kindness, good temper, or intelligence — even good looks and money — mean nothing in the nation's capital compared with where one stands in the pecking order. A CIA couple who maintain their cover are quickly "selected out" of any party they go to and end up in a corner talking to themselves.

CIA wives, particularly, feel this instant social failure deeply and resent it. Until the women's movement, most women were raised to channel their ambitions toward the areas of party-giving and cooking. When married to a CIA agent, they felt they were denied these things because of their husbands' work, and their marriages got into trouble.

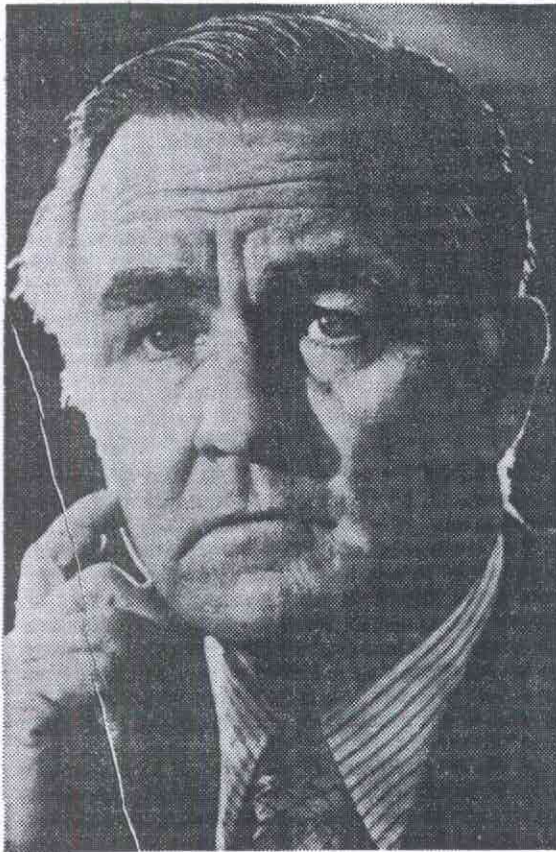
When CIA families go abroad they find their lives even more disrupted by status anxieties. The American official community, centered at the embassy, spends more time and effort than the Soviet KGB trying to discover who are the CIA families. If a CIA officer is assigned to the embassy under the guise of being in the Foreign Service, the U.S. Information Service, or the Agency for International Development, the real employees of those organizations ferret the CIA agents out and then take pains to treat them as second-class citizens. The government employees who are "legitimate" embassy personnel don't speak to them at all. If they arrive at the embassy under deep cover, with no false identity, then not even the other CIA personnel speak to them.

The game of uncovering the CIA people is made simple for the "legitimate" embassy personnel by a number of means. The State Department won't let CIA agents call themselves, as a cover, Foreign Service Officers; they have to say they're "Foreign Service Reserve" or "Foreign Service Staff" officers. Real FSSs, as they're called, are fairly low-level and real FSRs are never in political jobs, so the CIA's people — listed as FSS or FSR "political officers" — are obvious to one and all.

In the same status-preserving spirit, the State Department used to publish an annual Biographic Register, a who's who of the Foreign Service that included information on degrees, jobs, and murky pasts; it wasn't until 1975 and the murders of several CIA agents that State made the Biographical Register a classified document.

Envy, Jealousy, and Distrust

THERE ARE several ways to deal with the problem of credentials. One is to rise above the woes of status anxiety. Another is to learn to laugh them off, even if they are painful. Unfortunately, however, a more common way of handling the trade-off between your cover and your status is to give up some of the first to get more of the second. In foreign capitals CIA agents often have been so anxious for the natives and the diplomatic community to consider them important that they've made their secret jobs obvious — which has not only brought them envy, jealousy, and dis-



CIA Director Adm. Stansfield Turner.

trust, but has made it very hard for them to do their job of intelligence-gathering properly.

"Do you know that CIA people are paid double salaries to serve abroad?" the new political officer in Singapore said to me when I showed him and his family around the Singapore Swimming Club on the Sunday after he arrived. "They get paid twice as much as you or I do. They get paid for their cover jobs and then paid again for their hanky-panky work. That's why they live better than we do."

I felt flattered that I was holding my cover well enough to be told his secret, and I only wished what he was saying were true.

But it was an impression that was understandable, if erroneous. CIA officers did serve in covers that were lower in rank than their real jobs, and, both on the job and off, they didn't live lives consistent with the rank they were pretending to have. For reasons of their jobs, agents cultivate contacts in the local government and other diplomatic missions in circles far higher than people of their cover rank ever have a chance to meet. And they insist on renting the kind of houses to which their CIA rank entitles them, as well as demanding and receiving a lot of special perquisites.

My new friend was wrong about the double salaries, but all the CIA officers he had seen abroad would certainly have given him the impression that he had about that rate of compensation.

In particular, most CIA station chiefs are not content to live in quarters much less grand than the ambassador's official residence. In many countries, this makes sense — the CIA has liaison responsibilities that are officially recognized by the ambassador and the State Department. But this is not appreciated by the lower-level employees of the embassy, if

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It's told to them at all. Resentment of the chief of station's life style bubbles up.

In the past, many chiefs of state made no attempt to hide their preference for dealing with the CIA station chief rather than the ambassador — sometimes because they owed a great debt to the CIA, which may have stolen the election for them or financed the coup that put them in power. In any case, CIA station chiefs have always felt they could not entertain these men in hovels. It would be detrimental to the prestige and interests of the United States, they argue, if they did not have the rank and accoutrements of the foreigners with whom they deal. One station chief I knew in the 1950s got two grade promotions by this gambit. It has served many a CIA official well in regard to his housing.

Frank Snepp, in his book "Decent Interval," gives a vivid account of the perquisites agency personnel enjoyed in Vietnam. They had their own hotel, club, swimming pool, and cars. In the 1950s in Asia it was customary for CIA officers to have chauffeurs, too, on the rationale that you needed somebody around to guard CIA cars against looting. Since the cars were government property, the gas and oil

and maintenance costs, as well as the chauffeur, were paid for out of the station's housekeeping funds. People who were listed as lowly attaches were often seen driving around in big, unmarked, chauffeured cars, which drove the Foreign Service Officers into frenzies of envy.

"We'll Entertain Ourselves"

EVEN WORSE, perhaps, than using perquisites to fend off the pangs of status anxiety is CIA people's tendency to huddle together. If the rest of the world thought we were nondescript Army officers and the like, well, we knew who was and wasn't who and could play the game with each other. The other embassy personnel won't invite us to their parties? We're too low on the diplomatic list to get invited to

the important functions given by other embassies and by officials of the local government? We'll entertain ourselves. Conscientious CIA officers try hard to curb this practice, which after all is a breach of nearly every tenet of good security, but they fail more often than they succeed.

In the days when our national purpose was more clearly defined, when we would, in the words of John F. Kennedy, pay any price and bear any burden in defense of the free world, it didn't matter so much if the cover of CIA personnel was a little thin. In some countries, the prestige of the agency was even higher than it was at home, enormously higher than it has been at home for the last three years. In the Philippines in the late 1950s, the CIA was so well regarded that members of the Army Counter Intelligence Corps used to try to recruit Filipinos by passing themselves off as CIA agents. Today, the open life style of a station chief can lead to his death, as it did for Richard Welch in Athens.

Welch was killed by the gun of an anti-American assassin, but the gun was put into the assassin's hand by all the defenses against the dilemma of covert life that I've described. Welch lived in a house inherited from past station chiefs, everyone in the embassy knew his true position, and his biography appeared in the Biographic Register, which could be found in any library.

After Welch died the register was mercifully classified, but that doesn't mean an end to the problem. CIA personnel will always feel a strain from having to pretend to be much less successful than they really are — even if they love their work and believe in it deeply, they'll still feel pangs. That's human nature, and while we ought to curb the obviousness of CIA agents' identities, to some extent we've just got to deal with it.

One way to do that is to treat CIA agents sympathetically. These are obviously people who have sacrificed something to work for the agency, and who depend to an inordinate extent on having stable relationships with their co-workers, since they can't have stable relationships with anyone else. The main thing in an agent's life — practically the only thing, for many — is how he's treated at Langley, where he stands there.

So when Adm. Stansfield Turner quickly fired 820 Clandestine Services officers last year, my initial approval (some of those fired, I thought, must have been the people who made me decide to leave the CIA in 1973) gave way to misgivings. It's true that the greatest physical hazard many spooks have ever faced is the danger of choking on the pit of the olive in their martinis. But the greatest hazard we all face in life is not physical danger, it's having something eat away at our soul. No one has to be a clandestine operator, of course, but once he is, he is deprived of the normal means of sustaining his self-image that prevails in our society.

I don't mean Turner should have kept on incompetents. But I'm sure that after those 820 firings everybody else at Langley felt bitter and frightened. These are not, after all, people who have anything else to fall back on, and they need a lot of support from their organization. Turner has to use these people, and if he wants to use them effectively he ought to find a way of letting some go while making the rest feel secure.