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The Scandal Habit

The CIA is Washington's favorite whipping boy right now—a sort of poor man's substitute for Watergate. It seems that Washington reporters are unable to function without a government scapegoat to publicly humiliate and denounce.

Let William Colby don sackcloth and ashes and do penance on Pennsylvania Avenue! Let Richard Helms wash the feet of Bella Abzug on the steps of the Lincoln Monument!

We have become addicted to incessant scandal and shock. The daily revelations on Watergate, the banner headlines, the interminable courtroom struggles, the high drama of impeachment—all combined to create in us a craving for more, more, more.

In the sudden quiescence following Richard Nixon's departure, we suffer from excruciating withdrawal symptoms. We see spiders on the ceiling of every agency. Our alphabet soup—the FBI, the CIA, the NSA—is crawling with treacherous snakes and crouching rats. We need a "fix," but Watergate is gone. We settle instead for a pale and often incongruous substitute: a milque-toast methadone. We sock it to the spooks.

It's true, to a reporter, a spook is no more of a sacred cow than a senator or a member of the cabinet. And, when the CIA forgets its manners, transgresses its orders, or invades civil liberties, it should be properly chastised.

But the CIA isn't exactly the Burning Tree Country Club, or even the League of Women Voters. Spooks, after all, are hired to spook: to spy, and to be devious, and to fiddle in foreign intrigues, and yes, even to knock off an enemy or two. Surely a nation that can cheer James Bond as he whips old Goldfinger, or sit mesmerized by "Mission Impossible," can comprehend the nature of the CIA operative. And a nation that palpitates over all kinds of derring-do, from Evel Knievel to George Plimpton, can find in its heart a tiny crumb of awe for the effort to raise a Russian sub from the bowels of the ocean.

The News Business

One can of course argue the pros and cons of the morality of spooking and the secrecy of spookdom. One can even express pain over the expenditure of countless millions on seemingly fruitless quests. But, after all, these are men dedicated to a particular pursuit—the shadowy world of intelligence—and they do not live by your rules or mine.

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We are feeling righteous now, after the victories of Watergate. We like the sensation of seeing the vanquished vanquished. We remember the heady rapture of riding rogues out of town on a rail.

So now, each day, we seek new "highs," new media excitements. We dig and probe and prod and cast a jaundiced eye on everyone and everything, exulting in the awful imperfection of our government—as though any government or government agency could possibly be perfect anyhow.

The headlines imply it all: the FBI is wicked, the CIA is evil, and the NSA is so secret, it is positively satanic. And behold the cool smug faces of the network correspondents, eyebrows silenced by ancient critics, but still transparently relishing the revelation of each juicy, half-baked tidbit. Clutching our tumultuous breasts, we thunder our journalistic hymn: "We of the media shall give you the truth and the truth shall make you free."

I do not challenge our right and our responsibility to expose whatever worm we upturn as we gravel in the dirt of government. But do we really have to clothe our findings in religious fury and the ecstasy of self-sainthood?

Do we have to besmirch and besmudge even the honest, innocent bureaucrat who did the right as he saw it, even though you and I in hindsight think he was wrong? Do we have to sanctify the paranoias of the fearful, and stoke up the slumbering fires of the subterranean haters?

In the name of sweet reason, have we lost our sense of proportion and our sense of humor?

We damn the CIA not just for things it did, but for things some of its people talked about doing. By that yardstick, most of us would be behind bars for our verbal transgressions.

In the end, a lot of it is funny. The idea of using the spooky Howard Hughes to secretly raise a Russian sub, the idea of government agents asking the Godfather to knock off Fidel Castro, the idea of plowing through reams of bills and junk mail in search of a traitorous tidbit—all of these are as silly as Gordon Liddy's plan to use a boatload of prostitutes to compromise the morals of Richard Nixon's political rivals.

What we need in Washington right now is a pot of black coffee, a large dose of castor oil, and the hair of the dog that bit us. Because this is the day after the night before, and it is time to settle down to the humdrum job of telling it gently, without savagery, and without shrieks and whoops of journalistic righteousness.