

So the CIA Tutors—What's the Big Deal?

Those readers who accuse me of being more naive than a person of my age and upbringing should be won't be surprised when I confess that I don't understand the flap over the CIA tutors at Ballou High School.

To put my naiveté into perspective, I will say that I am not a fan of the Central Intelligence Agency, primarily because its lack of effective oversight makes it too close to being a government unto itself. I believe, without hard evidence to support me, that the agency, whose charter does not include domestic espionage, has done a lot of it, and for political rather than national security reasons. To repeat, I'm not a CIA fan.

I also believe that it was a big mistake, in light of the widespread mistrust of the CIA, for Ballou's principal, Reuben Pierce, to enter into the tutorial arrangement with CIA specialists without making the community—and most especially his faculty—party to the agreement.

Having said all that, I still must say I don't understand the flap. The program, as I understand it, involved 10 CIA specialists helping a number of Ballou math and science majors learn

computer technology, photogrammetry (the use of photographs to measure geographical distances) and photo science (techniques for identifying objects in photographs that normally would not be visible).

I don't know how many pragmatic applications there might be for the latter two specialties, outside the intelligence business, but I don't see the sinister implications that are being alleged.

"Ballou has the District's best science and math students coming here for the computer programs, and we're feeding them to the CIA," said Marilyn Lerch, the English teacher who, apparently, was the major organizer of the protest against the agency's presence at the Southeast school. "We feel that the risks involved . . . outweigh any positive effects."

The risks she cited include invasion of the privacy of students and faculty at Ballou and the possibility of covert recruitment.

William Simons, president of the Washington Teachers Union, echoed the recruitment suspicions.

"We can't say we know exactly why they're here," he said, "but we do know that the emerging part of the world

that is attracting so much attention is black. It doesn't take much imagination to figure out why they're here."

Here's where my naiveté comes in. Suppose, to put the worst face on it, the CIA specialists are in fact spies. What is going on at Ballou that would be of interest to an agency concerned with foreign, or even domestic, espionage?

Surely they aren't interested in the possibility of high school narcotics traffic. Student radicalism? Hardly at Ballou.

In fact, I find it difficult to come up with any answer that is more persuasive than the CIA's own explanation that it is an exercise in image-improvement. Presumably success in that regard would enhance the agency's ability to recruit minorities for CIA careers. But what is so sinister about that?

If there were agents in the building on a full-time basis, and if they had the run of the place, and if their time at Ballou were not fully accounted for, I'd have some serious misgivings. But absent even the slightest implication of any espionage activity at Ballou, I have trouble understanding the flap.

It has long been my feeling that the presence of the federal government here represents a largely untapped resource for our local schools. True, there have been government scientists who have volunteered their spare time to tutor local students, but nothing much has happened on a large, official scale.

I'd like to see government specialists regularly involved in high school tutoring here. Because of my own prejudices against the CIA—and most particularly because of my outrage over the agency's involvement in monitoring domestic political protest—I'd prefer to see the tutors come from HUD, HEW or Agriculture.

But if the CIA wants to improve its image, and if Washington students get a chance at some solid, professional instruction as a result, I don't see why we shouldn't leap at the opportunity. Even if there is some indirect recruitment going on, what's wrong with that? After all, the decision to seek employment at the CIA, like the decision to take advantage of the tutorial program, is entirely voluntary.

What is it that I'm overlooking? What's the deal? What is this flap really about?