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Project Mudhen, or Tracking Jack

By Jack Anderson
and Les Whitten

Deep within the Central Intelligence Agency, locked in one of its super-secret, three-way combination safes, is the story of an illegal operation.

It was a CIA farce, an exercise in domestic deviltry, a Mack Sennett comedy come true. It was called Project Mudhen.

I was the villain in this bit of CIA hilarity. It began over my access to information which the CIA had intended for the President, not for me.

The CIA's top snoops were particularly upset over a series of columns I wrote in late December, 1971. The most urgent of them warned that the Soviets had threatened to intercept a naval task force, which the U.S. had sent into the Bay of Bengal during the India-Pakistan war.

In another column, I wrote that the strongman we were backing in Cambodia, Lon Nol, was "a sick man, both physically and mentally." U.S. officials were worried, I reported, about his "haphazard, out-of-channel and ill-coordinated conduct of military operations."

I also wrote a Christmas Eve column, describing in discomfiting detail the threat to the peace in the Holy Land.

Not long after the New Year, the CIA began a search

for my sources. A staggering total of 1,566 CIA employees were grilled, without a single confession or clue.

Finally, on Feb. 15, 1972, the CIA, out of sheer desperation, placed me under surveillance. Twenty CIA heavies, laden with binoculars, walkie-talkies, secret cameras and other James Bond paraphernalia, followed me around the country and photographed people entering my office.

Three stakeout cars were strategically deployed around my house, like a scene from a TV mystery, ready to tail me wherever I headed.

These cloak-and-dagger routines happen to violate the law, which restricts the CIA to foreign operations. The CIA also is supposed to chase spies, not newspaper columnists.

Project Mudhen, therefore, became of the CIA's deep, dark secrets, in the same category as assassinations, burglaries and other extrajudicial doings.

The project got its code name, I presume, because the mudhen is noted for rooting around in the mud and for its obstreperous clacking when riled. But I am mystified by the personal code name assigned to me, "Brandy," since I am a notorious teetotaler.

For the next few weeks, I was accompanied far and

near by my CIA shadows. They rushed with me on March 15 to catch the shuttle plane to Newark, N.J., where some conspiratorial-looking youths hustled me into a car and drove me along backroads to South Orange.

But my CIA escorts were disappointed. The circuitous route was taken to avoid traffic. For all their breathless trailing, they got to hear me deliver a lecture at Seton Hall University.

The situation became more hilarious when CBS chose this same period to film a TV report on my activities for the show, "60 Minutes." For several days, CBS cameramen followed me around, with the CIA cameramen, presumably, not far behind. The result must have been a bewildering ring-around-the-rosy.

But for the CIA, the most traumatic event occurred on March 17 when I had a luncheon meeting with the then CIA director, Richard Helms, at the Madison Hotel in Washington. Helms' purpose was to persuade me to drop certain lines of inquiry that might create security problems.

But this required him to explain, unhappily, what secret national appletarts might be upset. At Project Mudhen, therefore, the forthcoming encounter was viewed with grave alarm. The CIA, assuming I might go unto them as they were doing unto me, feared I would come to the luncheon rigged up with concealed bugging equipment.

I am not privy to what electronic countermeasure

the CIA took, except that it was elaborate. Apparently, Helms was rigged with sophisticated electronic equipment capable either of detecting or neutralizing my non-existent recording device. A CIA technician, I understand, manned the dials in a nearby mobile unit or hotel room.

At the appointed hour, Helms faced me across the table, confident of his superior wattage. Relaxed and unfettered, he made an effective pitch, and I agreed to cooperate.

By late March, strategic sources tipped me off that I was being followed and helpfully provided me with the license numbers of the stakeout cars. I unleashed my nine children to initiate their own surveillance of the surveillants. My junior sleuths not only located the cars but photographed them.

On April 3, 1972, the men with binoculars ceased their vigil, perhaps demoralized by the countersnooping of my Katzenjammer paparazzi.

Meanwhile, back at the CIA, the gumshoes were able to state categorically that my sources were located either in the State Department, or the National Security Agency, or the Defense Intelligence Agency, or the Naval Intelligence Command. Mudhen thus exonerated the CIA and narrowed down the file field of suspects to about half the U.S. intelligence community.

Will a similar extravagance discover the source of today's column? Watch out, CIA! The kids on my block are ready for you.

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