

The Washington merry-go-round

WASHINGTON — 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 devilry, 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 discomforting 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 employes 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 whichever direction I headed.

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

Project Mudhen, therefore, became one 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, "Sixty Minutes." For several days, CBS cameramen followed me

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With LES WHITTEN

around, with the CIA cameramen, presumably, not far behind. The result must have been a bewildering ring-around-a-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, D.C. 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 applecarts might be upset. At Project Mudhen, therefore, the forthcoming encounter was viewed with grave alarm. The CIA, assuming I might do 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 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.

REAGAN RUMBLE: Insiders with the Presidential campaign of ex-California Gov. Ronald Reagan advise us that former Nixon campaign workers are being recruited in droves.

While few have gotten top jobs, many are veterans of the dirty tricks campaign of 1972 that led to Watergate. Some are already at work contriving shows of enthusiasm for the handsome conservative.

RED HERRING: After we named Soviet U.N. Ambassador Yakov Malik as a Soviet spymaster, our journalistic ethics were lambasted by Iona Andronov, a star writer for the Soviet's worldwide "New Times" magazine.

Now we have learned that Andronov's own journalistic ethics are on shaky foundations. Senior U.S. intelligence sources identify him as a dedicated KGB agent who poses as a newsman.

ARM TWIST: Easygoing Rep. Jerry Patterson, D-Calif., a junior member of both the Merchant Marine and Banking committees, has been assiduously seeking money from the industries he oversees.

Patterson scoured campaign contribution lists for bankers and shippers who come under his jurisdiction, then put the arm on them for \$100 tickets to a fund-raiser at the Disneyland Hotel. Helping him was his powerful chairman, Rep. Fernand St. Germain, D-R.I., of the Financial Institutions subcommittee.

BRIBE PROBE: San Francisco U.S. Attorney James Browning will take time off from the Patty Hearst case later this month to probe a \$50,000 bribe reportedly offered by Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos to a Congressional witness.

Browning began his grand jury investigation after ex-Marcos aide Primitivo Mijares gave us documentary evidence that a secret \$50,000 bank account was opened for him by a Philippine diplomat.

Mijares has sworn the bank account was ordered opened by Marcos to keep him from testifying on Capitol Hill against the Marcos regime. The account was abruptly closed when he testified anyway. Marcos denies the bribe charge.

WASHINGTON WHIRL: Marine Corps generals and aides, who usually buy their own uniforms, are "wear-testing" \$27,000 worth of new uniforms courtesy of the taxpayers. Purpose: to see whether the \$728 to \$1,326 outfits should be adopted by the Corps. . . The pro-industry Interstate Commerce Commission, which President Ford is now trying to shake up, has regulated trucking for 40 years but never formally revoked a trucker's license. . . At Philadelphia's new William Green Federal Office Building, the handsome vinyl floors laid down only a few months ago have already been covered by the General Services Administration with \$350,000 worth of plush carpeting. . . The Armed Forces Radiobiology Research Institute smashed 12 live monkeys into a metal wall as part of a brain injury study, we have learned. The 1973 research left some of the primates alive for days. The Pentagon says the monkeys were anesthetized before being put into the "impact sled."