

post
12-29-75

Richard S. Welch

THE MURDER OF Richard S. Welch, CIA station chief in Athens, was the entirely predictable result of the disclosure tactics chosen by certain American critics of the agency as part of their effort to destroy it. His was one of the names published in a periodical called Counter-Spy; in a book, former CIA officer Philip Agee has also named names. Precisely because those using these tactics include experienced former CIA men, they would be in a position to know that public identification of Richard Welch was tantamount to an open invitation to kill him. The surprise is not that this happened to him, but rather that it had not happened previously to others. That none of the critics pulled the trigger is meaningless. There are enough potential killers at large around the world to spare the critics that chore.

"If anyone is to blame for Mr. Welch's death, it is the CIA," explained Tim Butz of Fifth Estate, the group here that publishes Counter-Spy. "We don't want to see anyone shot." One can understand why Mr. Butz does not wish to acknowledge that his group set Mr. Welch up for the hit. He no doubt believes every word he says. To blame the victim for the murder, however, is simply to flee one's own responsibility for contributing to it. What other result than killing did Mr. Butz and his colleagues

expect when they fingered Mr. Welch? The ironies are overwhelming. Here are some American foes of the CIA adopting the morality and even abetting the technique—indirect assassination—which they have so often described as characteristic of the agency itself. Here are critics of the CIA employing a disclosure tactic virtually certain to lead to assassination, just as the rest of the country comes to the view, which the government has already formally embraced, that assassination is an unacceptable abuse of power.

Institutionally the CIA has a good deal to account for over the years. It is, however, currently making an accounting in the only way acceptable in a democratic society: according to internal and congressional processes of review. That review must, of course, go on—with due vigilance against such perils to individuals as have been freshly dramatized in Athens. To think that any of the CIA's past excesses constitute a moral license for extra-legal punishment of its employees is just wrong. Richard Welch, after all, was not the agent of a hostile power. He was an American citizen serving his government, and he had been accused of no crime. We mourn his death.