

Welch, Journalist, Figure in CIA Debate

By Laurence Stern
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The fatal shots fired in suburban Athens Tuesday at U.S. intelligence officer Richard S. Welch may figure importantly in the battle of public opinion in which the Central Intelligence Agency is now engaged in Congress.

CIA Director William E. Colby made it clear last week that Welch's death might be employed as an object lesson in pressing the agency's side of the impeachment argument over new security measures and conduct of the intelligence service.

It is an argument that Colby and others at the CIA Langley headquarters feel now being dominated by the opposition in congressional hearings and in the press.

Colby, a professional manipulator of political process in faraway corners of his past CIA roles, now faces the final and supreme contest of public opinion in his career. This time the battleground is at home in Washington.

Colby took time out Wednesday to perform a chore that no one would expect the head of the U.S. intelligence

establishment to occupy himself with. He personally denounced a press release issued by Fifth Estate, a group of radical, young pamphleteers who have been heckling the intelligence system for three years from a scruffy suite of offices adjoining Dupont Circle.

Fifth Estate had issued its statement in response to what it charged were unsubstantiated attacks in newspapers by the CIA's press spokesman, Angus M. Thuermer, and other claims by the agency that it was responsible for the murder of a young man for the murder of a young man.

In the statement, Thuermer denied responsibility and blamed for Mr. Welch's death it to the CIA that should have been more careful.

The significant part of the might otherwise be dismissed as routine Washington news, include Vietnam veterans for over a year, intelligence officers, and the first long-swinging indictment of the post-Vietnam war era to devote itself full-time to denouncing the CIA under today's scrutiny.

It publishes a newsletter, a quarterly magazine, "Counterspy," which seems constantly at the brink of financial collapse.

Among the information published in recent issues was that Welch was CIA station chief in Peru. He subsequently had been moved to Athens, which was unknown to the editors of "Counterspy."

Fifth Estate describes itself as an "adversary organization" that seeks to "expose the worst crimes of

power by national security bureaucrats in the U.S. and abroad. Its political line, reflecting the view of one of its members, former CIA covert operations case officer Philip Bar Agoy, is that the CIA has become a tool of repressive elites in many countries of the Third World.

It is not surprising that the CIA should be so angry on Fifth Estate in pressing its case that the publishing of agency operations and personnel has gone too far. From the agency's standpoint it is also a far more palatable to make the case against an obscure left-wing group on Capitol Hill.

Colby, who is due to be replaced by former U.S. ambassador to Paris, George Bush, has asked Congress for CIA money to punish the group for passing out information, filing criminal suits, and strengthening the government's injunctive powers to keep the press from publishing such secrets.

At the same time, the House and Senate committees on intelligence will propose new rules to give the CIA under today's scrutiny.

If the conflicts that have suggested between executive and legislative branches are any guide, the new congressional round on CIA legislation will precipitate further notes of confrontation between the administration and congressional Democrats as background music to the 1976 presidential campaign.

A major point of contention will certainly be the issue of how far congressional committees, news media or political advocacy groups

should be permitted to go in revealing the supposed secrets of the CIA and other national security agencies. The answers depend to some extent on the political and institutional interests of the beholder. Nonetheless, there are boundaries to the argument and some factual underpinnings that are likely to become obscured in the rhetoric and emotion of the debate.

At one pole of the dispute is the age position which calls for exposure of American agents abroad in order to "neutralize" as he puts it, "the CIA's support to repression in communist states. It can, significantly control political, economic, electoral, manipulation, or espionage.

The trend toward exposure reached almost armchair hobby proportions with the publication in The Washington Monthly magazine in Nov. 1974, of "How to Spot a Spook" by former State Department intelligence officer John Markakis.

Interest in the agency and its works has grown to such a point that handsome lecture fees can be commanded by defenders and critics of the agency who now ride the Chattanooga circuits either solo or in contrapuntal debating groups.

President Ford and Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger have, with Colby, staked out another parameter of the argument by calling for minimal disclosure of operations or identities.

President Ford, for example, asked the Senate intelligence committee to keep secret its report on assassinations while

Colby urged the Senate panel not to publish any names of CIA officials involved in the assassination schemes in order that they and their families not become targets of reprisal.

The committee ignored both requests, though it deleted most CIA names on its own initiative. Despite Colby's threats, it did publish 12 CIA names in the assassination report. Security leaks have been a major obsession of Presidents, especially Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon. But it has yet to be demonstrated that there have been any major security breaches in the press or intellectual that has not been available to foreign governments through other channels.

Furthermore, a good deal of the obsession with secrecy (the secret bombing of Cambodia is one notable example) seems to have been more concerned with preventing disclosure of executive actions. They would not stand the test of domestic public opinion rather than preventing leaks of vital strategic information to hostile foreign powers.

Ten years ago the professional identity and duties of any but the top three or four officers of the CIA was unknown outside of immediate kin and close social peers. Today it seems that everything but the agency classified telephone directory has been thrown into the public domain. Yet there has been no finding or claim that the agency's emergence from the closet has substantially weakened its intelligence gathering capability.

News Analysis

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