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Media Manipulation

The News Business

The power of the press is accepted as a fact of life these days, Watergate and its aftermath being the most concrete evidence.

But that should not obscure another fact of life: The press—print and broadcast—is routinely used by individuals and institutions, from the President and the White House down, to achieve their own ends.

Two cases in point, vastly different but with the common element of manipulation of the press, occurred in recent days.

The first was the use of the brutal murder of Richard S. Welch, the Central Intelligence Agency's No. 1 man in Athens, in a counterattack against those who

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criticize the CIA and try to strip away the secrecy it claims it must have.

Welch's assassination was a despicable act and, as a devoted public servant, he deserved to be honored in death. But the extraordinary fanfare surrounding the return of his body to this country and his ceremonial funeral in Arlington Cemetery with the President in attendance were clearly orchestrated by the administration as a media event.

The strategy was successful. The return of the body and the funeral were covered very heavily on television and less heavily in the newspapers. In the course of the coverage, attention was repeatedly focused on the charge that publication of Welch's name many months ago by an anti-CIA group in this country, and more recently by the Athens press, were to blame for his murder.

Implicit in that charge was the broader one that exposure of CIA operations by Congress and the press endangers not only the operations of the agency but the lives of its employees. So, ironically, the press was used to publicize what in its broad effect was an attack on itself.

That instance could be called an example of official manipulation—the use of the media by the government itself. It was overt in the sense that it was done publicly. The second instance involves less open manipulation.

On Jan. 7, the New York Times and the

Washington Post published stories stating that the CIA was embarked on a program of aiding anti-Communist politicians in Italy to the tune of \$6 million.

Neither paper disclosed where they got the information or how they came to get it—whether it was handed to them or they sought it out. The Times quoted "well informed sources," "sources who have a direct knowledge of the administration's covert political operations," "an American official" and, in a very generalized comment, a "high-level State Department official." The Post quoted "sources" and "informed sources."

The stories were picked up by the news

services and the broadcast media. Before nightfall, the CIA's new venture into Italian politics was known around the world.

A political upheaval in Italy, apparently unrelated to the CIA aid, obscured whatever effect the stories might have had there. It is safe to assume, though, that the publicity about the CIA aid could only have hurt its recipients. It is also safe to assume that whatever foreign policy purpose the administration had was thwarted.

In this instance, the press was used by unnamed sources who were opposed to the specific aid program or, more likely, to the whole idea of covert CIA aid to foreign political parties.

In an angry reaction to the stories, Ron Nessen, President Ford's press secretary, said they had undermined the conduct of foreign affairs. He voiced a "strong suspicion" that the stories were leaked on Capitol Hill. And he used the occasion to raise questions about the requirement that the CIA must report its secret foreign political activities to congressional committees.

The Post and the Times reported Nessen's suspicion about Congress promptly, but neither gave any hint as to whether Congress was getting a bum rap. They remained true to their sources.

Anonymous sources are part of the news business. Seldom does a day go by without at least one major news story in which they figure. There is no reason to think that situation will change.

But there is a question that can and should be asked: Have reporters and their editors become too comfortable with anonymous sources? And that leads to some other questions:

Does not the public have a right to expect a story like the one on the \$6 million to contain some information on the motivation of those who leaked it?

Why can't such a story indicate at least a generalized source even though confidentiality of the individual is preserved? Did it come from Capitol Hill? Or the State Department? Or the White House? Or several places?

Do reporters try hard enough to get sources to allow their names to be published? If a congressman decides that it is in the public interest to disclose a piece of information, should he be willing to have his name appear with it? And if not, should he give, for publication, an explanation of why not?

The whole business of sourcing is closely related to the subject we started with: manipulation. As long as the press is willing to accept material from anonymous sources and to print it without disclosure of the circumstances under which it was obtained, manipulation will flourish and "scoops" that serve special purposes, laudable or otherwise, will abound.