

Mr. Welch and Mr. Wheaton

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TO PHILIP WHEATON, whose letter is published today, there is within American society an "anti-democratic system" that "uses the CIA as its shock troops" to defend "our capitalistic system and/or geopolitical hegemony" around the world. What is wrong with the agency is not some "abuses" in its policies but its nature and existence. "We are at war with such a system," he declares. "We can only save this society by exposing such a system." Hence his organization, Counterspy, publicly identified Richard Welch, the CIA officer subsequently murdered in Athens. It intends to continue its chosen work.

Anyone who believes with Mr. Wheaton that his cause is holy (to "save this society") will have no trouble accepting his argument that the exposure of CIA men, even if exposure leads to their death, is necessary and right. After all, "we are at war." We, however, do not so believe. We don't believe his cause is holy; nor do we expect him to believe that our view of this complex situation is holy. We would prefer that the matter of holiness be entirely removed from debate over the CIA. For, as so much history should have taught us all, a declaration of sacred purpose has all too often announced a readiness to allow the end to justify the means. Mr. Wheaton's philosophy is similar in its essentials to that of the very national security state which he attacks: In the name of the cause he would see murder done.

Mr. Wheaton skips much too lightly over the question of what Mr. Welch might have done to deserve his fate. It is not the one man Welch but "the CIA's Welches" who suddenly, collectively, are swept up by his view of history and consigned to guilt for "serving a system."

Speaking as a newspaper which criticized the Allende overthrow in Chile and which has condemned the practice of assassination, we find this an appalling and morally opaque process by which to dispose of a human life. Mr. Wheaton would not even go through the motions of a trial, the classical procedure for determining individual responsibility.

To be sure, in lamenting that the CIA's "crimes are carried out in such a way that no individual CIA agent will ever be found guilty," Mr. Wheaton has a point, though not necessarily one he would make himself. The point is that democratic societies do poorly at vengeance. They do not quickly and summarily pin blame, once official policy changes, on those who created and carried out past policy, and treat them as villains. Democratic societies are in that sense flabby. No doubt justice would be more swift and sure in the society Mr. Wheaton wishes to "save." But we are not so sure we are ready to receive his grace.

The fact is that there is a crucial distinction to be made between exposing the policies and practices of an errant government agency in order to encourage reform, and acting in a way to put the lives of particular government employees at extra-legal jeopardy. It is not necessary, in order to favor reform, to condone disclosure tactics which can lead to assassination. We are not apologists for the CIA's "abuses" but neither do we feel that the agency, or even its covert operations function, should be abolished, and least of all because the agency represents a corrupt "system." The premise of democracy is that the people, through their representatives and officials, can use power wisely and well. Unlike Mr. Wheaton, we are not prepared to write that premise off.