

CIA News Management

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By Morton H. Halperin

WHEN Richard Welch arrived in Athens in June, 1975, to become the CIA station chief, his superiors at the Agency's Langley, Va., headquarters were concerned about his safety. Their anxiety did not stem from the fact that some months earlier an American publication called Counter-Spy had identified him as former station chief in Peru. Rather, the concern was based on Welch's choice of residence.

The house in an Athens suburb had been the residence of a succession of station chiefs over many years and was widely known in the Greek capital as such. The officials at CIA headquarters, aware of these facts, also knew that anti-Americanism was at a fever pitch in Greece, with much of the antagonism directed at the CIA.

It was decided to warn Welch. In keeping with the deference traditionally accorded a field representative by CIA headquarters, Welch was given no clear, unequivocal order not to move into the old residence. However, sources who have seen the pertinent CIA cable — it has never been released but was referred to briefly in the Senate Intelligence Committee report — say it all but instructed Welch to find another home.

The combined judgment of the people at headquarters, the cable said, was that it would be wisest for him to live elsewhere. Welch was advised in the strongest possible terms that there would be concern for his safety should he move into the traditional residence. Reportedly, there was specific reference to the danger of assassination.

Welch was unpersuaded. Back to Langley went a cable saying that, for administrative convenience and other reasons, Welch would take the chance.

All of this was well known at CIA headquarters when news arrived that Welch had been shot to death as he and his wife returned home late at night from a Christmas party at the American ambassador's home. But none of this pertinent information was made public at the time. Instead, the CIA swung into action with a classic "disinformation" campaign directed not at some hostile intelligence agency or enemy nation but at the American public.

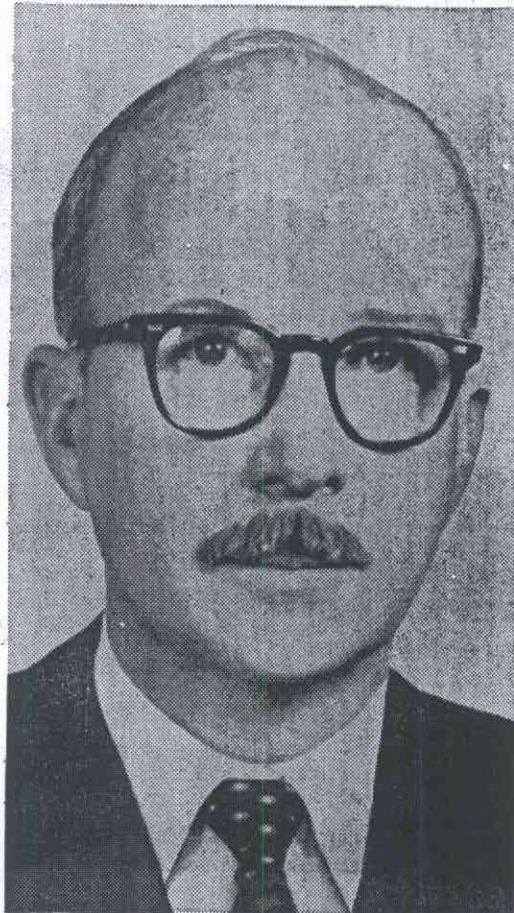
The CIA's then press spokesman, Angus Thuermer, began calling the reporters who normally cover the intelligence agencies. Thuermer, as was his habit, spoke on deep background; the newsmen could use the information but not attribute it to any source.

What Thuermer said was that Welch had been identified as a CIA agent in Counter-Spy, the magazine published by an anti-CIA group called the Fifth Estate. He did not tell the reporters that the CIA had warned Welch not to live in the house in front of which he was killed or that the house was known in Athens as the home of the CIA station chief.

Accepted Line

THE POINT here is not whether the assassins learned of Welch's identity because of the Counter-Spy article or his choice of residence — it is well known that in most capitals, particularly in Western countries, anyone who really wants to learn the CIA chief's name can do so. The point is rather that the CIA engaged in news management immediately after his death to make a political point.

The "disinformation campaign" was a success. The sto-



Richard Welch: warned.

ries filed out of Washington on Welch's death that night all noted that he had been listed in Counter-Spy. None mentioned the CIA warnings to Welch as to his place of residence.

The message was underlined when a CIA official, permitting himself to be identified as a "U.S. intelligence source," told the Associated Press that "we've had an American gunned down by other Americans fingering him — right or wrong — as a CIA agent." A few days later the White House press spokesman said Welch's death had come at least in part as a result of publication of his name. The Washington Post reflected typical journalistic acceptance of the CIA line when it said editorially that Welch's murder "was the entirely predictable result of the disclosure tactics chosen by certain American critics of the Agency."

Thus, the Welch murder has become part of CIA mythology. The assassination was, of course, tragic and inexcusable, but the aftermath points to the dangers of permitting an intelligence agency to use the flow of information to distort public debate on vital issues.

Halperin works at the Center for National Security Studies, where he recently co-authored "The Lawless State."