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SECTION B SUNDAY, JANUARY 11, 1976

One CIA Effort That Worked

By Norman Kempster

The CIA likes to retort to critics of its record that its failures make headlines but no one ever hears of its successes. So, perhaps it is time to give the agency credit for the successful effort to influence U.S. public opinion which followed the murder of Richard S. Welch.

Only a few hours after the CIA's Athens station chief was runned down in front of his home, the agency began a subtle campaign intended to persuade Americans that his death was the indirect result of congressional investigations and the direct result of an article in an obscure magazine.

Norman Kempster, a staff writer for The Washington Star, has been covering the congressional investigations of the CIA.

The nation's press, by and large, swallowed the bait. Few challenged the assumption that CIA critics had "blown the cover" of a secret agent. The facts are otherwise.

Welch's identity was a secret only in the most technical meaning of the word. To anyone in Athens with any interest in the matter, the identity of the CIA station chief was common knowledge.

In some countries, the agency disguises its operatives a bit more carefully by varying their "cover" jobs in the embassy. Sometimes the station chief might be listed as a political

officer and at other times perhaps as the trade attaché or some other title.

But in Athens, ever since the CIA began its activities at the time of the Greek civil war, following World War II, the agency's station chief has been carried on the embassy's books as the "assistant to the ambassador."

More importantly, the home of the station chief was well known. According to one person with first-hand knowledge of the matter, each successive CIA chief has lived in the same house at least since 1952. When a new man took over the post, the house went with it. It was in front of that house that Welch was killed as he returned home from a Christmas party Dec. 23.

The CIA's man in Athens has played an active role in Greek politics for years. According to information developed by the House Intelligence Committee, the military dictatorship that was overthrown in 1974 would deal only with the CIA station chief, bypassing the U.S. ambassador on all important matters of diplomacy.

Not only was Welch not a secret, he was not an agent; as the term is defined in the exotic lexicon of spying. As station chief, Welch's duties were primarily bureaucratic. The term "agent" refers to an individual—usually a foreign national—who provides information to the CIA and sometimes plays a role in covert action projects.

Agents work at the raw edge of espionage, often gathering information from inside a foreign govern-

ment at continuous risk of life and liberty. Agents almost never pose as U.S. diplomats. Station chiefs and "agent handlers" almost always use diplomatic cover.

The names of agents are much more carefully guarded secrets within the CIA than are the names of intelligence officers like Welch. There is little doubt that exposure would place the life of an agent in jeopardy but the same usually cannot be said about chiefs of station.

Of course no one knows the motivations of the masked men who killed Welch. The killers have not been identified. For this reason it is impossible at this time to disprove the suggestion of the CIA and its allies that

If the CIA believed that 'blown cover' doomed Welch, would it have replaced him in Athens with someone whose cover was similarly blown?

the death was linked to revelations about intelligence operations.

But the CIA surely knows that the facts surrounding the case make it unlikely that a "blown cover" had anything to do with it. Presumably, President Ford and his White House aides also know this.

Nevertheless, the night Welch was slain, the CIA's chief spokesman called a number of reporters to suggest that his death was a consequence of *Counter-Spy* magazine listing him as a CIA operative.

The link to *Counter-Spy* was never very strong. The magazine, the journal of an intelligence muck-raking organization called Fifth Estate, more than a year ago included Welch's name among the names of more than 100 individuals who were said to be station chiefs in cities from La Paz to Kathmandu. Welch was then in Lima, Peru. *Counter-Spy* never published his name in connection with the Athens station.

Even before the *Counter-Spy* list was published, Welch had been identified as a CIA operative by at least one foreign publication.

The Athens News, an English-language newspaper in the Greek capital, named six CIA operatives in

Greece on Nov. 25, almost a month before Welch was killed. Welch was one of those named and the CIA spokesmen implied that the News story was the coup de grace.

Yet Welch has been replaced as station chief by one of the other men named in the News story. The agency has given no indication that it believes its new chief is in any special danger.

These facts are somewhat dry and See CIA, B-4

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easily overlooked in the emotional flood that followed Welch's death. But they should be kept in mind in assessing what the CIA and the White House said about the case and the way it was reported by newspapers and broadcast stations.

The CIA's chief spokesman discussed the case under "deep background" rules which prohibited its direct attribution to him. But there was little doubt that the CIA was a primary source for dispatches which linked the killing with Counter-Spy and the Athens News.

David A. Phillips, a retired CIA official who usually reflects the agency's viewpoint, was more direct. He said Welch's death "represents the tragic kinds of occurrences which became inevitable when Mr. Agee initiated and others associated themselves with the sordid practice of identifying American intelligence officers overseas."

Phillips referred to Philip Agee, the disgruntled former CIA officer who named a number of CIA operators — station chiefs and agents alike, but not including Welch — in his book *CIA Diary: Inside the Company*. Agee, an avowed leftist who has acknowledged receiving Cuban help in writing his book, is

right at the top of the CIA's enemies list.

Four days later, White House Press Secretary Ronald Nessen said publication of Welch's name was "partly responsible" for his death. Nessen said Ford "emphatically" was concerned that publication of names would place in jeopardy the lives of other CIA operatives.

Nessen added that he "did not mean for a minute to imply" that the Senate or House Intelligence Committee investigations had contributed to the killing. But the inference was there all the same for those who wished to draw it.

Newspaper and broadcast coverage of Welch's killing and his hero's funeral carried just the slant the CIA wanted. For instance, *The Washington Star* began its report of his death, "The cover of CIA officer Richard S. Welch was blown a year ago in a U.S. publication . . . Last night he was murdered. . . ."

The *Washington Post* echoed the CIA line in an editorial that said Welch "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."