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Why Journalists Can't Be Spies

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A CIA official in Europe, one whom I had known for a long time and who was fascinated by issues of press and patriotism, once asked me the following question:

"If you were on a reporting trip in East Germany, and you happened to see large numbers of Soviet tanks moving westward, what would you do? Whom would you call first?"

I told him I would call my newspaper and try to file a story over the phone.

The question was clever, a probe of allegiances and inclinations. But it was not surprising because American foreign correspondents, if they were so inclined, would make marvelous spies. They can travel to distant places, talk to lots of people in and out of government, sometimes even take pictures, without arousing too much suspicion. The reason they can do this, of course, is precisely that they are *not* spies.

CIA Director Stansfield Turner and President Carter, however, either don't seem to understand this or are being rather casual about the safety of American correspondents abroad and the principle that the press must be scrupulously independent of government to carry out its proper role in American democracy.

In Washington earlier this month, Turner told a convention of newspaper editors that he would not hesitate to recruit a journalist for an undercover operation abroad when it was vitally important to the nation. Later, President Carter endorsed this policy as proper under "extreme circumstances" involving U.S. security.

Apparently, such extreme circumstances happen rather frequently, since Turner has also said that on three occasions in the last three years he authorized recruitment of journalists for covert operations that, for unexplained reasons, he says, were never carried out.

For American correspondents overseas, there could hardly be worse news than the top officials of the U.S. government putting on the record the best piece of ammunition that the secret police of dictatorships and totalitarian governments have had in a long time.

There is scarcely a U.S. reporter trying to cover Eastern Europe, Asia or South America who, assuming he or she is doing the job, has not been hassled by those police. After it happens the first time, a reporter never again is totally calm approaching a border or airport security check, pockets stuffed with notebooks filled with interviews of people whom foreign governments prefer the reporter hadn't met.

In these situations, which are growing more
In these situations, which are growing more frequent and tense, the reporter's only defense is his or her wits and ability to defend his or her work as legitimate journalistic enterprise.

My education began in Prague in January 1977, when Czech gumshoes raced into an apartment building ahead of me, turned out the lights in the stairwell and then came storming down the stairs at me, apparently to frighten me away from the people I was trying to visit.

That is tame stuff compared with what many U.S. reporters experience elsewhere. Indeed, the president appears to have forgotten 1977, when his human rights campaign stirred up all of communist Eastern Europe.

In June of that year, the Moscow correspondent of The Los Angeles Times, Robert C. Toth, was seized by the Kremlin's KGB security police,

The writer covers national security affairs for The Post and was formerly Central European correspondent.

hauled into custody for two days of questioning and eventually accused, among other things, of being a CIA agent. President Carter said then that the United States had expressed its "strongest objections about what has been done about Mr. Toth" and that the Soviets "know about our deep concern about their . . . actions."

Almost a year earlier, in May 1976, the Soviets had charged three other American correspondents in Moscow with secretly working for the CIA.

One of them was Alfred Friendly Jr. of Newsweek, who now is the press spokesman for White House national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski.

"We deplore such irresponsible charges," the State Department said at the time. The three are "highly respected professional journalists, and in our view the charges slander their reputations and the organizations they represent."

The State Department got it right in 1976. But it is now going to be increasingly hard for journalists to fight the battles for their integrity—and for the integrity of what they report—after the president and Admiral Turner have needlessly allowed an official cloud of suspicion to settle over correspondents.

Ironically, it could also harm U.S. attempts to badger communist Eastern Europe into paying greater heed to the provisions of the 35-nation 1975 Helsinki agreement dealing with greater freedom of movement for journalists, a provision that was supposed to have been a victory for the West.