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Press, CIA and idiocy

How soon will this country escape the wearing tide of stupidities about the press and the Central Intelligence Agency?

Now we've got former Ambassador William Porter asserting that when an American journalist goes abroad his first responsibility is to his country, not his publication. That I would expect to hear from the Kremlin, but not from an American representative who should have learned four decades ago that our press's first and last responsibility is to truth and our people's right to know it.

Opposite Porter are those who contend that press integrity requires total isolation from spooks and spies and cloak-and-dagger guys. The CIA has been dragged through so much embarrassment in recent years that it is easy to see how the absurd notion got abroad that no self-respecting journalist would say hello to a CIA type.

Why can't we get off this self-flagellation caper and let sanity prevail regarding the press and our intelligence agencies?

I don't want the CIA compromising American journalism by hiring a single reporter as a spy. I don't want to be suspect when I go abroad.

I never want to see the day when a U.S. ambassador in Ougadougou or Paris can assume that an American reporter has any obli-

gation to him. I don't want the CIA using U.S. or even foreign journalists to manipulate the internal politics of other countries.

But I don't want to see the press swallowed up in such anti-CIA paranoia that a newsman dare not take a CIA man to lunch, or talk to one at a cocktail party.

I have never spied for the CIA, never been on the CIA payroll, never spread any lies at the CIA's request — but I have had journalistic contacts with the CIA ever since I began writing about world affairs almost 24 years ago. I will continue to have such contacts.

Why? Because the CIA is this country's foremost compiler of vital information about other countries and their leaders.

Example: Upon returning from the People's Republic of China in November I set about writing magazine articles about that country, and I wanted the latest data about China's petroleum sales abroad, China's trade with the U.S., China's imports of grain from Australia, Canada, China's increased usage of fertilizers. I spent hours talking to country officers in the State Department about China's oil sales to Japan and the Philippines, to officials in the Commerce Department about China's GNP, population, 1976 trade surplus.

After I had worn myself to a frazzle, I talked to a single CIA official who sim-

ply handed me a report published in October by that agency's National Foreign Assessment Center. That publication contained, in clear detail, all the information that I had slaved to get from a maze of departments, agencies and offices, including several committees of Congress.

It is a foolish journalist who does not avail himself of CIA documents, CIA briefings, CIA expertise on who is doing what to whom in which country.

I also talk to the CIA because I believe good journalism requires lots of cross-checking. I learned while in government that the White House, State Department, Defense Department and CIA may have four different lines going on controversial issues — like strategic arms limitation talks. The journalist who isn't talking to them all will get "used" — or burned.

We don't need any new laws in this field. The journalist who becomes a spy for the CIA becomes a traitor to a free press; any CIA director who pays newsmen to spy is a fool. Yet the truth-seeking journalist who doesn't regard the CIA as just another repository of information is crippling himself.

If we could leave it at that, and end the going-nowhere House hearings, perhaps the press, the CIA, and even the Congress could get on with more productive pursuits.