

William F. Buckley Jr.

Should CIA agents wear blazers?

It's CIA-picking time again, and the season is jolly. It is alleged — indeed it is established — that journalists have been used by the CIA in the past few years, causing much consternation. Particularly so, one gathers, in the bosom of Congressman Les Aspin, chairman of a House intelligence oversight subcommittee.

Now there is nothing the matter with Les Aspin that could not be cured if only the Soviet Union would renounce the doctrines of Karl Marx. Mr. Aspin's subcommittee should study that problem, and issue a report.

It really does come down to that. Like policemen — do away with crime, and you can do away with policemen. Do away with foreign superpowers bent on oppressing the world, and you can do away with the army, the navy, the CIA and, for that matter, Mr. Aspin's subcommittee. What is seldom considered, in our holy war against the CIA, is: What are we supposed to do to survive in a resourcefully hostile world?

I say the question is seldom considered. In fact it was brilliantly illuminated in a single phrase used by Ray Cline, a former official of the CIA and sometime director of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence, at the hearing. Mr. Aspin asked Mr. Cline whether he didn't agree that the CIA should be barred from dealing with any foreign newsmen or news organizations. Cline replied, "I do not believe in unilateral disarmament."

That really tells it all. The trick is to reason a posteriori, from the data back to the principle. Do we need to know — for instance — what the KGB is up to in Mexico? In Quebec? If so, how do we go about finding out? One would suppose, judging from the attitude of Mr. Aspin and

a few other critics of the CIA, that we should devise a uniform for all CIA agents, who should keep regular office hours at highly advertised addresses in the metropolitan centers of the world, with signs, "Information about anti-western espionage, plots, hijackings, terrorism, and atomic development gratefully received. Informants should bring passports, proof of citizenship, and certified copy of income tax return."

What appears constantly to surprise students of the CIA is that the kind of activity the agency engages in can and sometimes does cause problems. For instance, if you pay a foreigner \$1,000 for slipping you secret information that permits you to abort a plan to kidnap the American ambassador in the Sudan, money has actually passed hands; money that flowed through the hands of an agent of the United States; into the hands of someone who might be hostile to the regime in his own country. That could represent a problem, but the correct question to ask is whether that problem should be faced — or whether in order to avoid facing it, we should forbid the American agent to bribe the foreign informer.

The problem principally dealt with by Mr. Aspin's subcommittee has to do with what they call the "domestic blowback." Here, stated theoretically, is a problem: domestically, which includes a ban against attempting to influence domestic opinion. (2) In the course of influencing foreign opinion, CIA activity conceivably disseminates information, or misinformation, that warts back across the seas contaminating our own pure air, which is the domestic "blowback."

Let us consider a hypothetical situation.

The Republic of Azania faces a national election. The Communists are predicting victory for their candidates and are flashing public opinion polls that appear to validate the claim and threaten the demoralization of the opposition social democratic party. The CIA, through a cutout, publicizes a phony poll that disputes the figures by showing that the social democrats are on the march. The problem is that the AP, not knowing that the second poll is contrived, might pass along the information and before we know it, we are listening to Walter Cronkite tell us that the social democrats are showing great strength at the polls in Azania.

I do not like misinformation, still less what the spy-people call disinformation; but such phenomena should be considered calmly. Mr. John Maury, a retired CIA official, told the Aspin subcommittee that, after all, "the great bulk of CIA media operations has been aimed at disseminating the truth to areas where it is not otherwise available. And," he added — softly, one imagines, as he addressed (a) congressmen who regularly distort data to advance their own ambitions, in a room crowded with newsmen — "news manipulation no doubt is a problem for a free press. Indeed, news is manipulated every day by the reporters who file it and the editors who present it. News manipulation is both a common practice and a lucrative profession."

Mr. Maury's charge is provocative, but it serves a purpose. The principal purpose. Namely, the need to introduce perspective in evaluating the behavior of the CIA.

Mr. Buckley wishes it to be on the record that he worked for the CIA from August 1951 to May 1952.