

U.S. CORRESPONDENTS GIVE VIEWS ON C. I. A.

4 at a House Hearing Say Any Link With Agency Beyond Exchanges of Data Is Violation of Ethics

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 28—Four longtime correspondents told a House intelligence subcommittee today that any relationship with the Central Intelligence Agency beyond an exchange of information violated the ethics of their profession.

The four, all with experience as reporters abroad, also agreed that the agency's new directive barring any contractual relations between that agency and American journalists would not be likely to allay suspicions in other countries that American correspondents, like those of many other nations, sometimes performed intelligence duties on the side.

The witnesses, who appeared together before the Oversight Subcommittee of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, were Joe Fromm, deputy editor of U.S. News & World Report; Herman Nickel, for 20 years a Time magazine correspondent; Tad Szulc, a former correspondent for The New York Times and now a freelance writer, and Ward Just, a former correspondent for The Washington Post and now also a freelance writer.

"How effective the directive will be in allaying questions raised around the world by stories that literally hundreds of United States journalists have secretly worked for the C.I.A. is another question," said Mr. Nickel, who is now an editor of Fortune magazine. He added: "When someone you suspect of being a spy gives you his Boy Scout's honor that he isn't one, you don't necessarily believe him. The insidious thing about the change is that it sows suspicions which are impossible to disprove."

Representative Les Aspin, the Wisconsin Democrat who is the subcommittee's chairman, asked each of the four witnesses beyond what point they would decline to go in their professional dealings with C.I.A. personnel overseas.

Special Circumstances

Such relations, Mr. Aspin suggested, might begin with a reporter seeking confirmation of facts in a news article and range through the exchanging of information, the briefing of correspondents by C.I.A. experts in advance of an assignment overseas, their debriefing upon return from such an assignment, giving the agency access to unpublished materials and, finally, giving correspondents the task of collecting bits of information abroad, whether or not for pay.

All said that they would consider going to the C.I.A. for confirmation of a report or to exchange information, but only in an effort to get as much as or more than they were giving up.

"You always have to ask yourself, why are they talking to you?" said Mr. Just, who added that he would not engage in any of those relationships as a matter of course but only when special circumstances warranted.

Some said that they would approve of a correspondent's being briefed by C.I.A. analysts on a subject of special interest, but only if the briefing was conducted at the correspondent's request.

None said that they would agree to be debriefed, or questioned at length, by the agency in return, however. "Debriefing doesn't really help my story, does it?" Mr. Nickel asked. "That's not my job."

And all agreed that any "tasking" of correspondents by the C.I.A. for the collection of intelligence, or such "support" functions as opening a post office box for the agency, were inappropriate.

And they also agreed with Mr. Aspin that any exchange of money, or of anything of value, even a lunch, with a C.I.A. employee would place a correspondent in an untenable position.

"In most cases," Mr. Szulc said, "I pay for the lunch."

Representative Edward D. Boland, the Massachusetts Democrat who heads the full intelligence committee of the House, said yesterday that the purpose of the hearings was "to explore whether the C.I.A. should be involved with the press at all, and if so to what extent and under what restraints."

"We are not interested," he said, "in drawing attention to past excesses of intelligence activities."

Today, Mr. Aspin inquired about the distinction in the minds of the correspondents between a journalist who worked on the side for the C.I.A. and one who signed a contract "to write something for another publication or to do some lecturing at a university."

"Those are things which appear in public print; they're not concealed or covert relationships," Mr. Szulc replied.

'A Useful Thing'

All four correspondents said that they were concerned about the question of domestic "playback," the picking up by American news organizations of propaganda, some of it false, that was planted by the C.I.A. overseas through its agents in foreign news organizations.

But Mr. Fromm said that "most foreign correspondents can and do attempt to evaluate" articles that appear in other publications before including them in their own dispatches, and Mr. Nickel said, "I suspect that the feedback problem is minor."

Mr. Szulc termed the C.I.A.'s new directive on its relations with the press "a useful thing," and Mr. Nickel said that he supposed it was "better to have it than not to have it."

The directive, issued earlier this month, prohibits the agency from entering into "any relationships with full-time or part-time journalists for the purpose of conducting any intelligence activities" without the express consent of the Director of Central Intelligence.

It does not, however, bar such relationships with noneditorial employees of American news organizations abroad as long as the managements of those organizations have given their approval.

"A reporter who moonlights for the C.I.A. or any other intelligence service because of the lure of money prostitutes himself," Mr. Nickel said.

"The mighty United States Government has plenty of resources of its own without having to rely on journalists to do things that simply aren't their jobs. Our patriotic duty is to keep our independence, for if we don't we can't properly fulfill our constitutionally recognized function in a free society."