

UPDATE | JAMES STACK

Authorship under gag rule

Frank W. Snepp, a one-time Central Intelligence Agency operative, came home from Vietnam, with a book under his belt.

Snepp, while headquartered in Saigon in 1975, had witnessed the frenetic US departure from Vietnam and what he saw as the CIA's abandonment of thousands of South Vietnamese employees and collaborators to the mercy of their enemies.

This is what his book, "A Decent Interval," was all about. Snepp put it on paper and, in November of 1977, he and his publisher (Random House) saw to it that copies of the manuscript got to all the major newspapers. An appearance by the author on the popular CBS "60 Minutes" show was also arranged.

All of this occurred in that critical period just before publication of the book which, predictably, enjoyed a very brisk sale. So brisk that, when the CIA and the Supreme Court finally got through with Snepp in February of last year, he was forced to turn over about \$142,000 in royalties to the government.

The high court ruled (6-3) that Snepp had violated a valid secrecy agreement under which he was required to submit for prior approval by the CIA anything written for publication concerning his intelligence assignment. The agreement had in no way compromised Snepp's right of free speech, the court said.

That gag rule still holds.

Snepp, despite having worked for the past 18 months on two other books and a screen play based on his struggle to get his first book into print, said Friday he is stony cold broke.

Snepp hasn't been allowed to earn a dime, he said, because any public expression concerning foreign affairs, the only field in which he is expert, is subject to approval by the CIA.

"This gag extends even to lectures," he said, "so I've had to turn down a couple of offers from Yale."

Snepp said a lot of people, including Oliver Stone, who won an Academy Award for writing "Midnight Express," are interested in his screen play, but can't afford the huge gamble involved.

"The CIA would have the right of final approval," he said. "Who would want to invest millions under those conditions?"

Snepp is literally living in penury. He owes \$50,000 in loans, most of it to Random House. He can't pay his rent, and he can't afford to move into a less expensive apartment because he can't handle a deposit.

"I'm at a kind of crossroads," he said in a telephone interview from his Virginia home. "If that screen play doesn't come through within a matter of weeks, I may be finished. It's that bad."

He sounded like a desperate man.



FRANK SNEPP ... says he's broke