

Post 10-1-71

F.Y.I.

From time to time the question is asked why newspapers never seem to get anything right and one answer, of course, is that we try, but that we are only human. Another answer, however—and a better one—is that in the complex and delicate interworkings of the press and the government it takes at least a little cooperation by the government if the public is to get a version of events which can properly be said to be right. As a case in point, we would like, strictly For Your Information, to walk you through a brief case history involving a news story on Page One of The Washington Post, on Sept. 3, and a subsequent article on this page on Sept. 8, both of which asserted that the Federal Bureau of Investigation had employed lie detector (polygraph) tests in an investigation of State Department employees. The original story said three or four officials were interrogated in this fashion as part of a government-wide inquiry into a leak of classified information having to do with the American position in the SALT negotiations. Today, in the letters space on the opposite page, FBI Director Hoover states categorically that both stories were "totally and completely untrue" and that "at no time did the FBI use polygraphs, as alleged, in its investigation." He takes us sharply to task for "this inept handling of information."

Well, we have looked into the matter and it is clear that we were wrong about the FBI's use of lie detectors. We are pleased to have this opportunity to express our regrets to Mr. Hoover and to set the record straight. But we are not prepared to leave it at that, if only because the implication of Mr. Hoover's sweeping denial ("totally and completely untrue") is that the original story was entirely wrong—that no polygraphs in fact were used upon State Department employees — and this is clearly not the case. Nor is it quite so certain whose handling of this information was "inept." The facts are, from all we can gather, that polygraph tests were administered to State Department officials by employees, and with equipment belonging to an outside agency—presumably the Central Intelligence Agency which has these instruments avail-

able for regular use in security checks of its own personnel.

In other words, we had the wrong agency, which is an important error and one we would have been happy to correct immediately, before it had been compounded in the subsequent article on Sept. 8, if somebody in the government had chosen to speak up. But the FBI was silent until Mr. Hoover's letter arrived 10 days later, and Secretary of State Rogers, who was asked about the story at a press conference on Sept. 3 in a half-dozen different ways, adroitly avoided a yes-or-no answer every time. That is to say, he did not confirm the role of the FBI, but neither did he deny it; he simply refused to discuss methods, while upholding the utility of lie-detector tests in establishing probable innocence, if not probable guilt. And that remains the State Department's position, even in the face of Mr. Hoover's denial. No clarification, no confirmation, no comment—despite the fact that the original story in The Post had been checked with the State Department and the role of the FBI had been confirmed by an official spokesman on those familiar anonymous, not-for-attribution terms which government officials resort to when they don't want to take responsibility publicly for what they say, and which newspaper reporters yield to when there is no other way to attribute assertions of fact.

The result of this protracted flim-flam was, first of all, to leave the Justice Department and the FBI falsely accused of administering lie detectors to officials of another agency, and then, with Mr. Hoover's denial, to leave the impression that no polygraphs were used at all, and you have to ask yourself what public interest is served by having this sort of misinformation circulating around, gathering credence. It is not an uncommon practice, of course, for the government, when it is confronted in print with an embarrassing and not altogether accurate news story, to clam up completely rather than help straighten out inaccuracies—especially when clarification risks confirmation of that part of the story which is accurate. But it is not a practice that does much to further public knowledge. And still less does it help the newspapers get things right.