

The Prouty-Butterfield Flap

The Alexander Butterfield-CIA story, which flared and then fizzled out in one brief week, provided a good—but not reassuring—case history of enterprise journalism as it is practiced on television today. There was a shoot-from-the-hip quality to it and a disturbing disregard for a man's reputation and for the public's need to make sense out of the strange doings in Washington.

The story had its beginning in an effort by two congressmen to defend their turf—namely the House investigation of the CIA. Reacting to a move to kill or restrict the investigation, they committed a little leak. They told reporters that they had learned of a CIA practice of “infiltrating” the executive agencies to the extent of placing an agent high on the Nixon White House staff.

The result was predictable. CIA Director William Colby called the story “vicious nonsense.” Ron Nessen, the

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President's press secretary, said a mountain was being made of a molehill. And reporters set out on the trail of the alleged part-time spook on the old Nixon team.

The next day, July 11, shortly after 7 a.m., the two top network morning shows—the CBS Morning News and the NBC Today Show—came up with a name—the same name. They produced former Air Force Col. Fletcher Prouty, live on CBS and taped on NBC. Prouty said the high Nixon official with CIA ties was none other than Alexander Butterfield, who in 1973 started Richard Nixon's slide toward disgrace by disclosing the White House taping system.

Butterfield was a CIA “contact officer” in the White House, Prouty said. His source: E. Howard Hunt, a long-time CIA man who later was sent to prison for his connection with the Watergate burglary.

Just what is Butterfield supposed to have done for the CIA? That didn't come clear. On the CBS show, Prouty said Butterfield's function was “to open doors for CIA operations.” On the NBC show he assented to a description of Butterfield as a “man with CIA connections.” Imprecise descrip-

tions to be sure, and far from identifying Butterfield as a CIA spy. But in the context, the implication was clear; Butterfield was the CIA's man right on the edge of the Oval Office.

Neither network provided a response from Butterfield or verification from any other source. NBC did couple a flat denial from Mrs. Butterfield with the Prouty charge. CBS put Prouty on the air without any denial, direct or indirect, but a half hour later reported that Mrs. Butterfield said the charge was “ridiculous.” Both networks say they tried hard to locate Butterfield before the broadcasts, but without success.

The story hung there for 2½ days. Prouty elaborated on his charge, and it was widely carried in the print press, usually coupled with a CIA denial and with emphasis on Prouty's statement that he was not calling Butterfield a “spy.”

Then Butterfield, who had not been reached by reporters, astutely accepted an invitation to appear on the popular CBS show, “60 Minutes,” that Sunday evening. There, before a prime time audience of around 20 million viewers, he indignantly denied Prouty's story.

“Not a shred of truth,” he said under questioning by Mike Wallace. At another point in the interview: “I have never been their designated contact man. That is absolutely false.” Later: “I had no contact whatsoever with the CIA.” And later: “I never did deal with the CIA in any way.”

(Wallace says that Butterfield was

not paid to appear on “60 Minutes,” but his and his wife's fares—his from the West Coast and hers from Washington—and their hotel bills were paid by CBS.)

Since then, Hunt has denied he told Prouty that Butterfield was a CIA contact, and Sen. Church, who heads the Senate CIA investigation, has said no shred of evidence has been found to support the charge. Nevertheless, the Butterfields feel that his job search

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(he was eased out of his post as head of the Federal Aviation Agency last March) has been seriously hampered. And it is a fact of life that undoubtedly there will be some who will say, years from now, when his name comes

up: "Oh, yes. He's the guy who scuttled Nixon for the CIA."

Prouty claims that he did not defame Butterfield—that he, after all, only called him a "contact officer." It is true that nowhere in the network transcripts is there the charge that Butterfield was a spy or an infiltrator. But consider this exchange between CBS reporter Daniel Schorr and Prouty:

SCHORR: Colonel Prouty, I guess you have no way of knowing whether President Nixon knew Alexander Butterfield, who worked in his office, was a CIA man?

PROUTY: I think that's one of the big problems. I would doubt Nixon or anyone else really knew it.

A strong implication that Butterfield



Alexander Butterfield

was more than a contact man came again later in the CBS broadcast when Schorr and Bruce Morton of CBS were recapping the Prouty charge. Morton stated the question: "Did the CIA infiltrate the White House and other government agencies?" A tape of Colby's "vicious nonsense" denial was run, and then Morton said: "But earlier on this broadcast, a retired Air Force officer who handled liaison with the CIA told Daniel Schorr that a high-ranking White House aide during the Nixon administration was a CIA man. And then he and Schorr went into the Prouty material."

On the NBC broadcast, reporter Ford Rowan developed Prouty's assertion that during Butterfield's military career he was processed for assignment to CIA, which led to this exchange:

ROWAN: Is there any doubt in your mind that Alexander Butterfield was a man with CIA connections, who went to the White House staff and his CIA connections persisted at the time he was on the White House?

PROUTY: No, I've never had

any doubts about that.

At the end of the segment, Rowan did note that Prouty said he did not think that "Butterfield or any CIA man assigned to the White House" was asked to spy on the President.

Now, if Prouty was merely saying that Butterfield was a contact man, the man the CIA dealt with when it had something to take up with the White House (Butterfield's denial rejects

man's reputation and of an important, and complex story. Not only does it appear that unjustifiable harm was done to Butterfield, but a great disservice was done to the public in that the Butterfield story drew attention away from a very serious question: Just what has been the nature and extent of the CIA's involvement in the operations of other government agencies? That question is going to be hard enough to answer. Such distractions as the Butterfield caper don't make the job any easier.

Schorr and Rowan were asked for their afterthoughts on the Prouty broadcasts. Schorr defends the use of Prouty without supporting evidence on the ground that in an earlier situation Prouty's information stood up. Rowan defends his broadcast on the ground that he had received some support for Prouty's story from several other sources.

Conceding those points, one must still ask why they didn't take the time to check on Prouty's story more fully or at least wait for Butterfield's response.

Schorr said that although CBS learned the evening before the broadcast that NBC also had Prouty, compet-



Col. Fletcher Prouty

even that role), why the rush by CBS and NBC to get the story before the public first thing Friday morning? And why the presentation of the Prouty revelation, if it can be called that, as a big development in the story about high-level CIA "infiltration" of the federal establishment?

In retrospect, it is clear that all concerned—Prouty and CBS and NBC—were careless in their handling of a

itive pressure was not a factor in the decision to go ahead. In fact, he said, that decision was made before he found out that Prouty had talked to Rowan. He noted, however, that Thursday was a dull news day and that the Morning News people were happy to get a good lead story for Friday morning.

Rowan conceded that competition was a factor in his pressing to get the story on the air. He said he didn't know that CBS had Prouty, but he thought ABC might have him. "In a situation like this," he said, "my thought is to get it on the air and see how it flies."

This one appears to have crashed.