

Jules Witcover

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Campaign Spying

Murray Chotiner, the old Nixon political agent, was quoted the other day as saying that Lucianne Cummings Goldberg, who successfully hoodwinked the McGovern campaign entourage last fall and reported daily to him, "was not hired as a spy and she did not function as a spy." She was hired, he said, "as a reporter, to report on what anyone could see and hear if they were there."

The observation is a classic example of the kind of doubletalk that characterizes the whole Watergate mess. Chotiner, it should be noted, was described throughout the 1972 campaign as the Nixon re-election committee's man in charge of "ballot security." That phrase, in retrospect, obviously means his job was to make not only ballots but the election itself secure for Mr. Nixon, by among other things planting an agent in the McGovern campaign.

The writer is a member of the national staff of The Washington Post.

One Lucy Goldberg, of course, does not an election victory, make. Nor is she the first such paid informer to infiltrate and deceive a campaign. But she was no reporter, except as she functioned for the purposes of establishing a cover. Women's News Service, which she said she represented, now says it never accredited her, and got two unsolicited articles from her, one of which—about casual dress on the campaign—was used without payment. She was a spy, operating under false colors, paid \$1,000 a week by Chotiner with Nixon campaign money.

There was, Chotiner further said, "nothing underhanded or illegal" about the arrangement, a view echoed by Mrs. Goldberg. "I didn't do anything criminal," she said. "I stole nothing."

The first part may be correct—that she did nothing criminal. The second is not; what Mrs. Goldberg stole in her little escapade was a part of the integrity of the press, and a part of the special privilege extended to the press in a presidential campaign.

Candidates permit reporters to accompany them on their campaign plane, obviously, for reasons of self-interest. They need not only the coverage, but also the money news organizations pay toward charter of the plane—something more than the first-class commercial fare, in the McGovern campaign. It's probably fair to say that without the press, there would be no huge campaign jets used.

There exists within a presidential campaign entourage nevertheless, one basic and vitally important understanding between the candidate and his staff and the traveling press corps. That is, that the press in general is on nobody's side. No matter how biased a reporter or commentator may be in what he writes or says for public consumption, it is generally accepted that he is his own man.

This does not mean, certainly, that reporters do not have personal preferences among candidates. They most emphatically do, and some demonstrate it in what they write or how they conduct themselves on the campaign trail. In 1960, when a Gallup Poll showed John F. Kennedy gaining, many reporters on his press bus applauded. In the Wisconsin primary in 1968, when Richard Nixon made a particularly effective speech at Wisconsin State University, a reporter stood in the press section and applauded. But both incidents were rare enough to be memorable. And nobody suggested in either case that the applauding reporters were working for the candidate involved.

Nor does it mean that candidates do not have favorites among the press, and do not accord them special treatment in terms of access. They do, and this is particularly true concerning columnists who are friendly to a particular candidate. On occasion, some columnists, who by definition are in the opinion business, have even written speeches for the politician of their choice.

But most reporters covering campaigns guard their independence fiercely and labor diligently to be fair. Fairness means saying so when a candidate a reporter may not care for performs well or says something significant, and it means saying so when a candidate he personally prefers falls on his face.



Lucy Goldberg

Last summer after the Democratic convention, the press corps covering Sen. George McGovern, which had a convivial relationship with him and his staff, did not hesitate to describe his dumping of Sen. Thomas F. Eagleton as the bungled debacle it was.

Most candidates understand that this is the way the press operates. They may not like it, but they live with it. What they do expect is that the reporters they permit aboard their planes and into their headquarters and hotel suites are reporters, not spies for the opposition.

Thus, when any political operative trades on the relationship that exists between candidate and press by infiltrating a spy posing as a reporter, he subverts the press as well as the opposition candidate. The press can report a campaign from a distance, but not nearly as effectively as from the inside. There is a distinct advantage to the public to having the press see the candidates close up, in unguarded moments. The proximity better enables reporters to assess them and report with insight about them.

Critics in both parties and in the press as well correctly warn of excesses and abuses in the relationship; that candidates and reporters get too close, too chummy, and in the process the reporters are brought into camp.

Undoubtedly, there are always patsies in the press corps, and politicians ever-ready to make use of them. But the patsies are the exception; a reporter soon learns that in the long run his independence and his integrity are his best assurances of fair treatment from fair-minded men — even in “the dirty game of politics.”

In incidents like the Chotiner spy-planting caper, not only the press but also the voter who is dependent on its report about the candidate and the campaign is the loser. Politicians who have to consider that there may well be a spy in the press corps cannot be blamed if they become less open and cooperative.

Chotiner, for his part, comes out of a political environment of distrust between candidate Nixon and the press, an environment that has equated the press with the opposition. It's not surprising, then, that he would think nothing of subverting it to his own ends — and then blandly saying the spy was hired “as a reporter.”

In the current climate of Watergate, the press has been riding high. But the press lives constantly with a credibility problem of its own, and the Lucy Goldbergs of this world only compound it.