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William F. Buckley Jr.

LEVELING WITH READERS

In recent weeks several correspondents, thoughtfully sending me copies, have triumphantly advised editors of newspapers in which this feature appears, that "Mr. Buckley was himself a member of the CIA," and that under the circumstances, that fact should be noted every time a newspaper publishes a comment by Mr. Buckley on the CIA.

Now the Boston Phoenix, which is that area's left-complement to the John Birch Society magazine, publishes an editorial on the subject that begins with the ominous sentence, "William F. Buckley, Jr.'s past is catching up with him. In the '50s he served as E. Howard Hunt's assistant in the Mexico City CIA station . . ." Accordingly, the Phoenix has protested to the editor of the Boston Globe, and reports to its readers, "Ann Wyman, the new editor of the Globe's editorial pages, is now considering whether to append Buckley's past CIA affiliation to his column, which appears regularly in the Globe. Wyman intends to consult with other Globe editors . . . The Globe may finally be on to him."

If so, it would indeed have taken the Globe a very long time, since it began publishing me in 1962, and my CIA involvement, a 25-year-old friendship with Howard Hunt, is, among newspaper readers, as well known as that Coca-Cola is the pause that refreshes. But one pauses to wonder what is the planted axiom in the position taken by the Boston Phoenix?

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It is true that I was in the CIA. I joined in July, 1951, and left in April, 1952. Now the assumption, not always stated, is that obviously anybody who was ever a member of an organization, defends that organization. But one wonders: why should this be held to be true? The most prominent critics of the CIA are in fact former members of it.

I attended Yale University for four years. Is it the position of the Boston Phoenix that, therefore, everything I write about Yale is presumptively suspect, because as a Yale graduate I am obviously pro-Yale? But it happens that shortly before entering the CIA I wrote a book very critical of Yale. And, as a matter of fact, I have in recent years written critically about Yale on a dozen occasions. So consistently, indeed, that Miss Wyman may feel impelled to identify me, at the end of every column I write about Yale, in some such way as: "Mr. Buckley, a graduate of Yale, is, as one would expect, a critic of that university."

I am a Roman Catholic, and have written, oh, 20 columns in the last 10 years critical of developments within the Catholic Church. Should I be identified as a Roman Catholic?

I like, roughly, in the order described, 1) God, 2) my family, 3) my country, 4) J. S. Bach, 5) peanut butter, and 6) good English prose. Should these biases be identified when I write about, say, Satan, divorce, Czechoslovakia, Chopin, marmalade, and New York Times editorials?

I wonder if Miss Wyman is being asked, implicitly, to label the religious or ethnic backgrounds of her columnists? "Mr. Joseph Kraft, who writes today on Israel, is a Jew." That would presumably please the editors of the Boston Phoenix. Or, "Mr. William Raspberry, who writes today about civil rights in the South, is black." Or how about: "Mr. John Roche, who writes today in favor of federal aid to education, receives a salary from Tufts whose income depends substantially on federal grants."

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Pete Hamill, who laughed his head off a few years ago at the hallucinations of Robert Welch, asks in the Village Voice: "Is Bill Buckley still a member of CIA? Have any of Buckley's many foreign travels been paid for by CIA?" One columnist recently wrote that National Review's defense of the CIA, and my own friendship for Howard Hunt, might suggest that the CIA had indeed put up money for National Review over the years, though he conceded that if that were the case, the CIA was indeed a stingy organization—Garry Wills knows, at first hand, something of the indigence of that journal.

Unfortunately Wills is the exact complement of Revilo Oliver, who was booted out of the John Birch Society for excessive kookiness sometime after he revealed that JFK's funeral had been carefully rehearsed. Both are classics professors by background. Perhaps one should identify anyone who writes about politics and is also a classics professor as being that? The Boston Phoenix and Miss Wyman should ponder that one.