

Letters to the Editor of t

Mr. Bennett Replies

Editor, *The Wall Street Journal*:

Under the title of "The Grand Cover-Up" (Apr. 19) Edward Jay Epstein reported to your readers that I was involved in a specific "plan to obscure . . . CIA connections to [Howard] Hunt and Watergate," and was "feeding stories which would focus attention on the White House (and Charles Colson in particular) to Bob Woodward." All this was by way of illustration for Mr. Epstein, who was discussing the ethical dilemma faced by newsmen who are searching for legitimate sources but end up dealing with people who presumably have an axe to grind.

Unfortunately, Mr. Epstein had not done his homework. If he had called and read this particular effort to me before turning it over to your editors, I could have pointed out a number of factual errors. Ticking off some of the more glaring ones:

1. He says, "Mr. Bennett also employed E. Howard Hunt as a 'consultant' after he left the CIA and began working for the White House, and coordinated some of his activities both before and after Watergate." The facts are these: Mr. Hunt retired from the CIA and joined the Mullen Company before I ever became involved with it; he was hired as a copywriter and was working there when I acquired it. Several months later, Charles Colson called me to ask if I would permit Howard to accept part-time employment at the White House. I agreed, and Howard began working evenings and weekends for the White House while maintaining his writing assignment with us. The only activities that I "coordinated" were those legitimate public relations efforts which he carried on for our clients. Never at any time did I give him any instructions relating to his White House assignment, which culminated in the Watergate break-in.

After the break-in, I terminated Howard's employment with us, and my principal activities with him then related to his request that I help him find an attorney. At Howard's suggestion, I asked Gordon Liddy to help him obtain counsel. Once Howard retained Bill Bitting's services, he and I never spoke again.

2. According to Mr. Epstein, "a number of Hunt's pre-Watergate activities could obviously embarrass the CIA. . . . Bennett explained to his CIA case officer . . . that he planned to use, among other things, his connection with Woodward to divert public attention from the CIA." The facts are that, on July 10, 1972, (the date Epstein uses) I had never met Bob Woodward, and, therefore, could not have laid any plans to do anything with such a "connection." The purpose of my meeting with my case officer, on the 10th of July was for me to inform him that I had fully and totally revealed to the U.S. Attorney every aspect of the Mullen Company's relationship with the CIA.

Now, on that occasion, my case officer and I did speculate together about what really had happened in the break-in. Unknown to me, he went back to the office and recorded my speculations in the memo to which Epstein refers, giving them far more weight than they ever deserved. Other investigators, coming across this "secret CIA memorandum," have jumped to the conclusion that I was "reporting in" with hard facts; a memo on which I have never had the opportunity to review or comment has now assumed an undeserved status as absolute truth.

There were at least three such memos filed over the next year and a half, each written without my knowledge and each growing out of what I thought were casual conversations. Each one contains serious misinterpretations. While Mr. Epstein speaks only of the July 10th memo, he includes quotations that, in fact, come from the other two, thus compounding the confusion for anyone seeking to know what really happened.

3. Mr. Epstein says, "If Woodward and Bernstein had not concealed the interest behind this source [Bennett], the film (as well as their reporting of Watergate) would have had to be different in some respects. The plot would show the Chief Officer of a CIA front group successfully manipulating news coverage of Watergate to conceal a set of covert connections."

The facts are that I was not "the Chief Officer of a CIA front group." I am not now, nor have I ever been involved in any CIA intelligence gathering or information disseminating activities. My only connection with the CIA stems from the fact that I allowed them to use my company's name as a "cover" for the activities of two of their agents overseas.

Woodward and Bernstein did not conceal any CIA interest behind me because they never knew about it. I didn't tell them about it because I didn't know about such an interest either, as far as Watergate was concerned. And I categorically deny the inference that I was "Deep Throat." Although I did talk to Woodward frequently, nothing that he attributed to "Deep Throat" came from me. I learned about most of that material when I first read the book, just like everyone else.

Mr. Epstein's principal source seems to be Fred Thompson's book "At That Point in Time." Since I have not read it, I will not comment other than to point out that it came out rather early in the flow of Watergate literature, and was written prior to the exhaustive investigation conducted by the Rockefeller Commission. The Rockefeller Commission examined this entire area in great detail, and I would suggest that their statements are more current, more authoritative, and more to the point. In Chapter 14 of their report, you will find the following:

"The Mullen Company was a legitimate public relations firm, with a number of clients having no relationship to the CIA. . . . The existence of . . . cover arrangements did not involve the Mullen Company in the collection or transmission of intelligence itself. Its only involvement was in the administrative arrangement for operating the offices in which an agency employe worked during various periods of time. . . . There is no evidence of . . . significant contacts between Hunt and the agency [CIA] from the time of his joining Mullen until July 1971 when he became a White House Consultant.

"No evidence has been found that the Mullen Company or its employes were either involved in those activities [the Fielding and Watergate break-ins] or that they served as a vehicle for the CIA involvement in them.

"There is no evidence that he [Bennett] learned anything that gave him notice of Hunt's illegal activities until they became public knowledge.

"The Commission has found no evidence . . . that leads it to believe that officers in the agency actively joined in a cover-up conspiracy formed by the White House staff in June 1972. . . . The evidence

does not indicate . . . that the agency personnel ever knew of or participated in a plan of the White House staff to abort or impede investigations into possible violations of the law by members of that staff."

Mr. Epstein's theory—that the CIA was engaged in deliberately leading journalists astray through me—was originally propounded by Chuck Colson, and as far as I know he still holds to it. By his own admission, however, he has never been able to find any evidence in support of it, other than his own interpretation of what those "secret CIA memos" really mean. My interpretation—that they mean very little and were a result of serious misunderstandings on the part of the men who wrote them—has been accepted as authoritative by the Rockefeller Commission, who interviewed Mr. Colson, myself, and the writers of the memos at great length. While I am delighted by this official, later vindication, I am distressed that the earlier speculation is the version of things which somehow seems to survive. Anything *The Wall Street Journal* can do to help later fact erase earlier fiction will be much appreciated.

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[We are happy to put on record Mr. Bennett's version of the events, but suggest he might read the Fred Thompson book, which presents a different version on a number of important particulars. In any event, judging by the points he disputes in Mr. Ep-

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stein's article, Mr. Bennett's actual quarrel is with his CIA case officer's description of the Bennett-Woodward conversations.—Ed.]