

JAN 8 1976

NYTimes

Death and Secrecy

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Jan. 7.—The murder of Richard S. Welch, Central Intelligence Agency station chief in Athens, was a piece of cowardly terrorism. No past abuse by the C.I.A. can justify random crimes against its officers.

Understandably, the Welch case has brought to a boil the resentment felt by C.I.A. veterans at critics of the agency. Many honorable and brave persons have worked there over the years, often providing wiser analysis than any other source, and they may well resent the idea that the public lumps them in with tricksters and would-be assassins.

But it is another matter entirely to use the murder of Richard Welch as a political device, as President Ford and his national security assistants are evidently trying to do now. Ceremonies honoring a respected Government servant are being manipulated in order to arouse a public backlash against legitimate criticism.

Immediately after the murder, C.I.A. officials sought to put the blame on an obscure left-wing organization, Fifth Estate, that has published the names of U.S. agents, including Mr. Welch. The C.I.A. director, William E. Colby, denounced the group's behavior as "irresponsible and paranoid."

As a matter of evidence, it is exceedingly unlikely that recent publication of Mr. Welch's name was responsible for his death. His cover in Athens was extremely thin. He lived in a house known by many to have been used by C.I.A. station chiefs for years. His function was hardly a secret.

Leading C.I.A. figures in many foreign capitals have in fact made little effort to conceal their role. The home of one in Europe was casually pointed out to me recently. They all tend to be listed under similar, unconvincing titles in State Department registers. The C.I.A. could and should provide deeper cover to meet what may be a new kind of terrorist threat.

Mr. Colby's denunciation plainly had a larger purpose: to make the case that the C.I.A. needs more secrecy in general than it has been getting lately. It was easier to make that argument in terms of some minor left-wing group than by attacking the Congressional committees whose probing has really agitated Mr. Colby and other officials.

There are secrets that need protection. The wholesale publication of agents' names, for example, seems to me hard to justify—and likely to be a wrecking operation.

So Mr. Colby has a point when he says, as he often has said, that his agency cannot conceal everything any

longer but should be able to protect a narrow class of true secrets. The trouble is that what the Government tries to conceal is not narrow or logical.

Mr. Colby himself, not long ago, tried to censor from a book the fact that his predecessor, Richard Helms, mispronounced the word Malagasy at a National Security Council meeting. He tried also to suppress publication of details of Tom Charles Huston's illegal domestic security plan after the whole plan had been printed in The New York Times. And of course the C.I.A. did unlawful acts for years under the cloak of secrecy.

Presidents have also carried out through the C.I.A. operations so large, and so political in nature, that they could never remain secret and should not. The Nixon Administration's attempt to upset the constitutional processes of Chile was a past example; a current one is the intervention in Angola. Such operations are undertaken in secret for the very reason that, if they were submitted to the public scrutiny our system requires, Congress and the public would reject them.

The Welch case will be used by Mr. Colby to lobby for secrecy legislation that he has long sought. It would allow the Government to get injunctions against publication—by newspapers or anyone else—of secrets disclosed by present or former intelligence employees. The way would also be open to bring reporters before grand juries and demand that they name any such sources. And the definition of "secrets" would remain quite vague.

In the Pentagon Papers case, Justice Potter Stewart of the Supreme Court warned that the Government was hurting its own cause by trying to sweep too much under the label "secret." "When everything is classified," he said, "then nothing is classified. . . . The hallmark of a truly effective internal security system would be the maximum possible disclosure, recognizing that secrecy can best be preserved only when credibility is truly maintained."

Much unhappy experience cautions against letting emotions of the Welch murder lead us to careless legitimizing of secrecy. And there is a broader danger.

President Ford and his colleagues, judging by their recent comments, hope to prevent any thoroughgoing reform of the C.I.A. They will use the Welch case to that end, in particular to resist limits on covert operations and to reduce Congressional scrutiny. If they succeed, the ironic result would be to preserve the very faults of structure and performance that have hurt an agency with much good on its record.