

Press Credibility And Journalist-Spies

COLUMBUS, Ohio—In the old days --the pre-Watergate days--when even small deceptions by the government, once revealed, were considered scandalous, the revelation that the Central Intelligence Agency was using American foreign correspondents as spies would have provoked an uproar.

Remember the furore in 1967 when Ramparts magazine disclosed the CIA's infiltration of foundations, labor unions and student organizations? In contrast, there has been only muted criticism in the wake of the disclosure a few weeks ago that the CIA had on its payroll overseas some three dozen Americans who were either working as foreign correspondents or masquerading in such positions as a cover.

William E. Colby, director of the agency, has already promised that five of those operatives working full time

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The writer, a journalism professor at Ohio State University, was a Moscow correspondent for the New York Herald Tribune. He later served as White House correspondent for the Los Angeles Times.

for general-circulation news-gathering organizations as well as for the CIA will be "phased out" of their spying roles. But he has also made the explicit decision to maintain contractual relationships with newsmen working for specialized publications or as freelance reporters.

Colby apparently draws a distinction between larger news-gathering organization and smaller ones, between general-circulation organizations and trade publications. Foreigners do not make such nice distinctions; to them, an American newsmen is an American newsmen. Why would anyone believe that Colby has indeed removed the stigma of spying from American journalists overseas?

Putting aside the credibility problem of the American government, obvious in these Watergate-dominated days, consider the status of Soviet foreign correspondents: The Soviet Union's leadership repeatedly denies that any Soviet newsmen working overseas are government agents. It claims that Soviet newsmen are simply gatherers and interpreters of news for the benefit of the reading public in the Soviet Union.

The claim, of course is laughable, and no American official talking to a Tass, Izvestia or Pravda correspondent in Washington is naive enough to think he is dealing with a bona fide reporter. For this reason, Soviet newsmen do not have an easy time with officials in countries outside the socialist bloc.

American newsmen have a far easier time of it abroad. They develop sources and uncover news because their reputation for freedom, fairness and nonentanglement with their own government has been respected over the years. Only in Moscow—and perhaps in Peking, where this writer has

had no experience—are American newsmen treated as government agents. For years, American newsmen in the Soviet capital laughed off allegations of spying out of the feeling that the Russians were only applying the same standards to foreign newsmen that they used for their own.

The Russians have had the last laugh.

The CIA does not deny the news reports of its entanglement with the American press. "We cannot comment on covert activities," an agency spokesman said in virtual confirmation.

Nor would the agency comment on Colby's plan for disentanglement in the future. That plan—to fire some but keep other newsmen—does not go far enough. American newsmen abroad as well as at home must remain free of their government to act as a distant early-warning system in reporting problems and progress that might affect this country's interests abroad. Newsmen often do a better job of reporting than either covert CIA agents or overt members of the diplomatic corps.

That lesson was brought home to me 15 years ago in Czechoslovakia. Just out of graduate school, I had gone there as a freelance writer and had obtained interviews with Czech officials responsible for the country's television system and the youth movement. I also visited coal mines and steel mills in a part of Moravia generally off limits to Americans. Before I wrote my stories, I tried to check my information with American diplomats. The result of my effort—made only a few years after William N. Oatis, an Associated Press correspondent working in Prague, had been jailed as a spy—was terrifying.

The embassy officer led me to a secure room behind a door as heavy as a bank vault's. When I started talking, he began taking notes rapidly and then questioned me closely.

"What else did you learn? What else did they tell you? What else did you see?"

The officer grilled me until I re-

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fused to say more. Then he said: "You correspondents can find out a lot more than we diplomats because we simply cannot get access to the same people or travel as much."

Unwittingly, I had become an agent of my government rather than a representative of the American people. Now I could see how the Czechs might have misunderstood Oatis' role even if he were not, as charged, a CIA employe.

When I left the embassy that afternoon, it was with the fear that I was in far greater danger abroad from my own government than from a government which still, at that time, had a statue of Stalin looking down on the capital.

American newsmen must not be compromised in the same manner that so many—too many—officials, bureaucrats and military men have been corrupted in recent years. The public and Congress should demand that the CIA break all contractual relationships with bona fide newsmen. Beyond that, publishers maintaining foreign bureaus should seek out and discipline any employees with dual relationships.

Anything less makes the news business the handmaiden of the government and that cannot be tolerated. Otherwise, the free flow of news from overseas—so important to public awareness—will be seriously jeopardized.