

Visiting with Vesco

After fleeing prosecution on charges of masterminding a massive mutual-funds swindle and attempting to obstruct justice, Financier Robert Vesco has made himself about as accessible to newsmen as the Abominable Snowman. Thus it surprised the veteran journalists who had been trying to corner Vesco in

TIME, APRIL 15, 1974



INDICTED FINANCIER ROBERT VESCO
Profanity and pregnant pauses.

his Costa Rican refuge that the first substantial interview with him appeared in the April 5 issue of the fledgling biweekly *New Times*—and was written by a novice, Neil Cullinan, a political science professor at Fort Valley State College in Georgia. Cullinan's coup was quickly matched by *Washington Post* Reporter Laurence Stern and CBS's Walter Cronkite. All three interviews yielded fascinating material on the fugitive's mood and life-style. They also demonstrated that reaching such a quarry can produce more self-serving and evasive responses than fresh information.

Cullinan got to Vesco through mutual acquaintances among Costa Rican politicians. The result was a series of conversations in Vesco's opulent retreat outside the capital, San José. Throughout one talk, a small handgun rested on a table near the casually dressed Vesco. During another, Vesco unburdened his contempt for American democracy ("goddam mob rule") and sympathy for Nixon's fallen men ("Take John Mitchell, that poor s.o.b., or Agnew . . . These people cannot afford to pay what I'm paying in legal fees—well over \$1 million a year").

To the *Post's* Stern, who was surprised to find his interview request granted, Vesco sang a similar refrain, adding: "I wouldn't go back home now if they granted me total immunity." In his televised phone talk with Vesco, which was filmed on both ends and aired on two consecutive nights last week, Cronkite got him to discuss some details of his own case. Vesco insisted that his gift to President Nixon's 1972 campaign was not intended to buy off an investigation of his affairs by the Securities and Exchange Commission. He also said that it was Nixon's former political adviser, the late Murray Chotiner, who had told him that \$200,000 of the gift should be made in cash. Vesco went on to depict the President and himself as victims of a vague political conspiracy and said that three prominent mem-

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bers of past Administrations had attempted six months before the Watergate break-in to enlist his help in bringing down Nixon. Cronkite failed to ask their names; indeed, the questioning was rather gentle. When Cronkite did ask pointedly if Vesco had ever personally discussed his gift or SEC problems with the President, Vesco allowed a pregnant pause and then feigned deafness.

Restraint in France

Thirteen months ago, before lunch with three prominent journalists, French President Georges Pompidou remarked: "To each his troubles. Nixon has Watergate, and as for me, I am going to die." None of his three companions—Françoise Giroud of *L'Express*, Pierre Viansson-Ponté of *Le Monde* and Roland Faure of *L'Aurore*—used the information directly or indirectly while Pompidou lived. Nor did Giroud publish the news that Pompidou was suffering from multiple myeloma (bone-marrow cancer), a fact she had learned prior to the lunch last spring.

That kind of self-censorship, which American and British newsmen find all but incredible, was typical of how many French publications and the government-run television network handle the medical secrets of great personages. In the U.S., the mental and physical health of recent Presidents and presidential candidates has been the subject of close scrutiny. In France, circumspection goes beyond the grave; three days after Pompidou died last week, the official cause of death still had not been disclosed.

One reason is that the French have more built-in respect for the privacy of their leaders than Americans do. In the case of the French press, that delicacy has material aspects. The government controls the supply of paper and since World War II has granted the press important tax concessions. Whatever the motive, most French newsmen managed to ignore the all-too visible symptoms of Pompidou's ill health until the President's meeting with Richard Nixon in Iceland last May. When American journalists reported on Pompidou's sickly appearance and speculated on the cause, French publications began to take note of it. Revealing photos were widely published, and some commentators openly called on the government to provide information about the President's health. None was forthcoming, and few reporters did much independent digging. The dread word cancer remained unpublished.

Most restrained of all was the government TV network ORTF, which virtually ignored the illness for a year, avoided using unflattering pictures and did not even prepare a film obituary. The coverage on all three government channels on the night that Pompidou died consisted largely of pictures and classical music.