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Slain Agent Feared for CIA Lives

By Dan Morgan

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Richard S. Welch, the murdered Central Intelligence Agency chief in Athens, was concerned for a long time about the security of agents serving abroad, one of his former supervisors said yesterday.

"Sooner or later one of our senior officers will be assassinated—it might happen to any of us," Welch reportedly told his boss several years ago.

David Phillips, head of the Association of Retired Intelligence Officers and chief of the CIA's Latin American operations from 1973 to 1975, recalled the conversation yesterday. The association was formed recently to help improve the image of the CIA and its officers.

Welch felt it was "incredible that CIA agents hadn't been the victims of terrorist attacks already," Phillips said.

Welch was killed outside his home in an Athens suburb after an embassy Christmas party Tuesday night. The slaying immediately became an issue in the current controversy over public exposure of CIA activities, because Welch had been identified as an agent in the Nov. 25 edition of the English language Athens Daily News. Earlier, his name had been mentioned

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In a publication of an intelligence muckraking organization called Fifth Estate.

Phillips said yesterday that he had received a letter from Welch only four days before his death in which Welch had extended an invitation to "come visit us in our home, which is very pleasant if somewhat notorious."

Several colleagues and friends described the 46-year-old slain agent as an "erudite" man with a mastery of classical and modern Greek, Spanish and French. Welch reportedly would enliven government meetings on current topics by citing anecdotes and precedents from ancient Greek and Roman history.

Beyond these scholarly qualifications, Welch also possessed talents that were highly regarded in the intelligence bureaucracy, friends said.

His assignments included a series of posts considered highly sensitive for United States foreign policy—Cyprus, Guatemala, Guyana, Peru and, finally, Greece.

A friend who knew Welch in Guayana and Peru said the official was "the one who was least likely to be thought of as a CIA agent. He was not one of the cowboys. You couldn't imagine him sprinkling powder on Fidel Castro's shoes so his beard would fall out. He was the epitome of the officer who was involved on the intelligence side rather than counter measures."

The Castro reference was to

a recently revealed ploy that was once considered by the CIA to harass the Cuban leader.

Welch served in Cyprus from 1960 to 1963. He went to Guatemala in 1965 as the No. 2 CIA official, after a brief stint in Washington. At that time, it was widely believed that the agency was backing the Guatemalan military's tough campaign against Communist guerrilla activities.

Welch was in Guyana from 1967 to 1969, when the United States was actively working to prevent Cheddi Jagan, a political leader suspected of Communist leanings, from coming to power.

Welch later served as CIA station chief in Lima, Peru, in 1972 and 1973, where a leftist-oriented military regime was in power.

According to Phillips, Welch moved through these assignments with a growing reputation as "one of the two or three men in the CIA who had the potential for aiming at any position in the agency, given time and experience."

Phillips, as chief of CIA's Latin American operations, supervised Welch's work in Peru.

Welch graduated from Harvard in 1951, after majoring in Hellenic studies.

"He once said that we were doing a tough, vital job that required tough, talented people to do it, and he thought he was one of those guys," Phillips said.