

IES, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 14, 1969

Observer: Let's Pretend With Uncle Sam

By RUSSELL BAKER

WASHINGTON, Oct. 13— At the Department of Federal Information, Mister Mustover's desk was neat. You could tell from a glance at his neat in-basket and his neat out-basket, as well as the neat positioning of his telephone and his water carafe that Mister Mustover was an exemplar of neatness.

He examined the application form and said, "It says here that you want some Federal information. You have come to the right place, provided of course—" and he paused to achieve gravity of effect, "provided that the information you want is not, ah, shall we say delicate."

Information Wanted

His inflection hinted at warehouses of information whose secrecy was so vital to the national security that hot tongs could not extract it from Mister Mustover. One sensed Mister Mustover's importance to the security of the Republic. So did Mister Mustover. It was an awesome responsibility deciding which Federal information should be divulged to common humanity.

"I'd like some information, please, on the case of the Green Berets."

"Of course," Mister Mustover said, "there is no case of the

Green Berets. We have a number of Green Berets and any number of cases, but none of our cases involve any of our Green Berets. It has been a pleasure serving you."

"Mister Mustover, I am a taxpayer."

"Who isn't?" Mister Mustover said, using a handkerchief to remove some dust from his water pitcher.

Unmaking a Case

"My uncle is a Congressman."

"Why didn't you say so?" Mister Mustover inquired. "You wanted some Federal information on—what was it again?"

"The case of the Green Berets."

Mister Mustover called for a file. It was very neat. He read it. "Yes," he said. "Of course," and "Hmm." He closed the file. "I was correct in the initial instance," he said. "There is no case of the Green Berets. What you refer to has been officially declared an uncase."

"A South Vietnamese, doing spy work for the Berets and thought to be a double agent, was killed."

"He has been officially declared unkilld," Mister Mustover explained.

"The Army entered formal charges accusing a number of Green Berets of involvement in his—well, the Army called it murder."

"Those are uncharges," Mister Mustover said. "Since the gentleman in question has been officially unkilld, uncharges ensue quite logically."

"But the Government has let ugly things be published about the Green Berets, and they say they have been treated badly. Shouldn't those men have a chance to prove they're speaking the truth when they say they didn't do anything dishonorable?"

"You don't seem to understand," Mister Mustover said. "Officially, nothing happened. If nothing has happened, how could it possibly be either honorable or dishonorable. Nothing is a very passive phenomenon."

Mister Mustover was a neat logician, all right.

"But according to the papers—"

"Just a moment," Mister Mustover interrupted. "The Department of Federal Information has no interest in information circulated in the press. That has been officially declared uninformaton. Placing excessive credence in it is entirely out of order. Why, according to the papers the Long Island Rail Road is still a mess, but the fact is that Governor Rockefeller has officially declared it the finest commuter railroad in the country. Officially, that railroad is now an unmess."

"Don't change the subject. I'd like to know why the deceased gentleman in question—"

"The undeceased, please."

"— Why the undeceased gentleman in question was officially unkilld."

"— Why the undeceased happened. If nothing happened, certainly everybody involved in it must have come out of it unkilld."

Preventing Unsleep

"Tell me, Mustover, does the Government often officially declare unevents?"

"Only when the event, if left undone, might compel the public to ask themselves extremely awkward moral questions or cast the American image in an unfavorable light and prevent people from sleeping well," Mister Mustover explained. "All declarations, you see, are made solely for your good."

"Did we really land men on the moon, Mustover? Or was the whole thing an unspace venture that cost us an unthirty-billion dollars?"

"Be proud," Mister Mustover said. "Officially, we went to the moon. Officially, the man you inquire about is unkilld."

"Thank you, sir. You've taken a load from my shoulders."

"Sleep well," said Mister Mustover, "twenty-four hours every day."