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CC:CIA



Arthur Hoppe

WHEN THE Freedom of Information Act became law last June, I promptly dashed off a note to the CIA asking if they had a file on me. Frankly, I didn't have much hope. Who am I to be spied on by my own government?

Imagine my pride and elation, then, when a fat manila envelope arrived Monday from the CIA containing my file. Hot ziggedy! Now I was a real somebody on my block.

First I read the nice three-page covering letter from Mr. Gene F. Wilson, the Information and Privacy Coordinator, apologizing for the six-months delay. Then I eagerly studied the file.

The more I studied it, the more my elation faded. Darn it! The whole thing was a mistake. The CIA had blown it again.

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THE MEAT of the file was a two-page memorandum dated April 14, 1970, in which I became "Subject 269758," who had written a "particularly vicious . . . satire of alleged CIA operations in Southeast Asia."

"Particularly vicious"? Attaway, Hoppe baby! So I looked up the column. It quotes Newsweek as saying CIA's Air America in Southeast Asia was now the second biggest U.S. airline.

Then there were a lot of motley jokes about how the CIA would run an airline — boarding passes you memorize and eat, stewardesses who inquire, "Coffee, tea or hemlock?" and a pilot who wanders into the cabin to ask if any of the passengers happen to know where the plane is going. "Particularly vicious"? It wasn't even ordinarily vicious.

But the CIA didn't think it was funny. So they ran a check on me. The only two overt acts they could come up with, unfortunately, were that I had written in 1962 that Communist Party leader Gus Hall was "sort of lovable" and in 1964 that black revolutionary Robert F. Williams wasn't "a nut."

The CIA had me on both counts. Of course, in the column about Mr. Hall, I had also written: "I think communism is a pretty atrocious idea. And I figured if you could love a Communist, you could love anybody" — the point being that one could hate ideas without hating those who hold them.

As to Mr. Williams, I had interviewed him in Cuba, which I had toured with 70 or so ace U.S. newsmen. He was on the lam from the FBI and predicting a bloody black revolution in America.

I wound up that column saying, "Well, personally, I don't agree with Mr. Williams' premises, his methods, or his conclusions." But the memo left that part out, too.

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IT DID CONCLUDE, however, with: "Attached are copies of previous articles in which Subject was critical of the Agency." So maybe there's hope for me yet.

After all, practice makes perfect. And if every citizen who accuses the CIA of bungling gets investigated, maybe the CIA will stop bungling these investigations.

Well, that's another for the little old files.