

CIA

Panel Monitors CIA News 'Plants'

WXPost JAN 17 1976

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The Central Intelligence Agency maintains a top-secret coordinating committee with the State Department and the United States Information Agency to make certain key policymakers are not taken in by exaggerated or false news stories planted by the CIA's covert propaganda network, according to intelligence sources.

The propaganda coordinating committee meets only when a major CIA covert media project is about to break, and even then, according to intelligence sources, only a handful of officials are informed.

"If too many are told," one former agency official said recently, "the project may not remain secret. And with covert media projects, we are never certain the planted material will surface publicly. We only hope so."

Although the group provides warnings for high government officials, no similar protection exists for the American public—a situation that has drawn the attention of the House and Senate committees investigating the CIA's covert journalistic operation.

CIA Director William E.

Colby told the House committee that any pickup of CIA-generated stories by American news organizations "is a purely incidental effect of the activity which is conducted abroad with its objective abroad and with its impact abroad."

According to former top CIA officials, it was just such an "incidental" effect of a covert propaganda operation that led to establishment of the coordinating committee.

In the early 1960s, these officials say, the agency was using its resources in the Far East to create irritations between the Soviet and Chinese governments.

At that time, the two Communist powers were beginning to have disagreements but were far from the open break that subsequently took place.

CIA-sponsored radio stations on Taiwan and elsewhere in Asia broadcast as though they were in China and would attack a Russian leader. The broadcasts, monitored in Hong Kong, would be replayed in the unwitting world media.

See JOURNALISTS, A7, Col. 2

JOURNALISTS, From A1

On one occasion, a CIA agent was infiltrated into China with a false story about the Chinese leadership. The story was picked up by Chinese fleeing the mainland and, according to a former CIA official, passed on as true when the refugees got to Hong Kong.

The story thereafter was carried by international news services and the USIA's Voice of America, which broadcast it round the world.

Only after CIA officials in Washington informed VOA that the story was false was machinery set up to keep key officials informed of the CIA's covert news operations.

"Contamination," the agency word for domestic U.S. distribution of its overseas propaganda efforts, has gone beyond pickup of news stories.

Another Far East covert operation involved reprinting entire issues of mainland Chinese newspapers after first removing one story and replacing it with a false one written by CIA employees. The real newspapers, held up in cooperating post offices, were then replaced by the doctored ones, and mailed to subscribers all over the world.

At a recent Senate intelligence committee hearing, Sen. Walter Huddleston (D-Ky.) asked a former CIA official, David Phillips, if there were instances "where we have been the victims of our own (CIA) media efforts within this country."

"That has happened," Phillips replied.

In 1973, after CIA had reviewed its past use of journalists, an operational regulation was drafted to bar covert propaganda operations if they risked influencing American public opinion directly or indirectly. However, according to congressional sources who have read the regulation, it has loopholes that have permitted CIA-generated

articles to continue to come into the United States.

After 1973, for example, the CIA continued to subsidize a London-based news feature service called Forum World Features. Begun in 1966, it supplied six articles a week to 150 newspapers in 50 countries, according to the feature service's 1974 promotional material.

The Washington Post and other U.S. newspapers, for example, received the weekly service by mail with the understanding they would pay for anything that was used. Most of Forum's output consisted of legitimate articles but a few were on subjects the CIA wanted publicized. One such article distributed in 1974 was "KGB in the Middle East; What are the Soviet spies up to now?"

In April, 1975, Forum abruptly closed down after a London weekly disclosed its CIA connections.

A former top CIA official denied operations such as Forum World Features violated the 1973 regulation. "We try to concentrate on the behavior of (U.S.) enemies in the world," he said. "We're preventing suppression of truth . . . information that doesn't pay off. That's why CIA must do it."

The congressional committees are also concerned about the continued employment of American journalists by the CIA and the possibility they may be used to influence public opinion in this country.

Although the agency in 1973 said it discontinued the employment of full-time staff members of American news gathering organizations, CIA Director Colby told the House intelligence committee in November that about 30 part-time employees and American free-lance writers were still under contract.

Colby said they were used "primarily for intelligence gathering" and also to "make contacts with people that are

difficult for an official of an embassy or American mission to get in touch with."

It was only on limited occasions, Colby said, that these journalists would be used for "planting stories," and then only in the foreign press.

The use of part-time American journalists creates a thorny problem for both the CIA and news gathering organizations.

Colby, for example, has consistently refused to tell the Associated Press and United Press International if any of their several hundred part-time reporters (called stringers) around the world also work for the agency.

Both organizations have a policy that forbids their employees from taking funds from an intelligence gathering agency but they are not sure it is effective.

The UPI stringer in Quito, Ecuador, for example, who also writes for that city's leading newspaper, was listed in Philip Agee's "CIA Diary" as a person through whom in 1963 Agee, then a CIA agent, occasionally placed propaganda. In a telephone interview, the stringer confirmed he was mentioned in Agee's book but said Agee's "impression" of his role was wrong.

Rod Beaton, president of UPI, said he was unaware of Agee's allegation, and added that the stringer had a "good reputation" and that UPI would "have one of our key people check it out."

It is also possible that stringer-CIA agents are on the payrolls of major newspapers and television networks.

Agency officials were unhappy in 1973 when forced to give up connections with full-time journalists. During the 1950s and 1960s, many reporters undertook full or part-time CIA projects. In the Communist bloc countries and the Soviet Union particularly, journalists were almost the only agents the CIA had.

The CIA, according to one

official, now does not want to close out the use of stringers. "How are we going to collect intelligence," he asked recently, "if you have a diminishing permissibility for cover?"

As for the argument that the CIA involvement compromises American news organizations, one former top agency official with experience overseas responded, "Don't tell me about the glory and purity of the press. I'm not impressed."

Last year, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) circulated among news media executives a prospective bill that would require government agencies, such as the CIA, to publish in the Federal Register the names of any journalists hired by contract. The aim was to halt the practice by exposure without barring reporters by law from taking such employment. To Kennedy's surprise, most executives who responded opposed the idea.

Colby also told the House committee that two of the CIA's former full-time journalist-agents, carried on both roles with the approval of their employers.