SFChronicle JUN 18 1978 **ANALYSIS &**

## Life Without Badges

# Cost of Cover in the CIA

*By Joseph Burkholder Smith*

TWENTY-FIFTH college reunions are great occasions for letting the world know how well you've done, and mine was no exception. All my old classmates, it seemed, had become assistant secretaries of state or vice presidents of General Motors or had acquired some equally impressive title.

So it was a little embarrassing when they'd ask me what I was up to. Not that I hadn't done well myself — I was at the time fairly high up in the Central Intelligence Agency. But I wasn't allowed to say that, so when they asked, I had to mumble something vague about being a civilian employee at Patrick Air Force base, an excuse that, I could tell, conjured up images of genteel failure (too much drinking, perhaps) in the people who heard it.

Not being able to impress my old classmates was a small wound, but it symbolizes an important problem for CIA agents. We live in a society where lots of people plan their lives so as to accumulate the greatest possible number of credentials of the sort that will wow their peers at reunions and similar moments. These credentials give many Americans a sense of identity and of security.

CIA people are by no means immune to the desire to impress people with credentials, but their jobs are directly at odds with that urge. In that way and several others, we in the CIA have been deprived of the normal ego supports of the American life of our time and how we dealt with (and didn't deal with) their absence from our lives has had something to do with how our agency has (and hasn't) done its job.

It wasn't just our status among our peers that suffered as a result of out work. Normal family life was a victim too. The CIA's Clandestine Services division has for years had the highest divorce rate of any organization in the government.

Part of the reason is that recruits of my generation of clandestine operators were instructed never to tell their wives what they were really doing. "Just say it's a question of national security," they told us, when we had to take one of our frequent absences from home. Of course, many men also discovered quickly what an improvement that line was over the old "working late at the office" routine and took advantage of it.

Still, most of the marital problems came not from philandering but from the unspectacular, bitter toll that living under cover takes on people. Officers with good marriages might tell their wives in general terms what kind of work keeps them out at night, but they have to insist that the wives give no hint. The first thing a CIA wife learns is never to ask another woman what her husband does, for fear she will be asked the same question.

CIA wives also have to join their husbands in keeping their children in the dark. When schools have programs in which the kids' fathers tell their classes about their fascinating work, she has to help invent reasons why her child can't volunteer his father's participation. When the son wants to visit his father's office, the way his friends do, she must try to ease his terrible feeling of rejection when his father tells him no. This kind of travail makes many women wonder if it's worth the effort.

*Clandestine operators were instructed never to tell their wives what they were doing because of 'national security'*

If a CIA agent is stationed in Washington, he has to get used to being asked at every party, by every stranger he meets, "what do you do?" Personal qualities like kindness, good temper, or intelligence — even good looks and money — mean nothing in the nation's capital compared to where one stands in the pecking order. A CIA couple who maintain their cover are quickly "selected out" of any party they go to and end up in a corner talking to themselves.

CIA wives, particularly, feel this instant social failure deeply and resent it. Until the women's movement, most women were raised to channel their ambitions toward the areas of party-giving and cooking. When married to a CIA agent, they felt they were denied these things because of their husbands' work, and their marriages got into truoble.

When CIA families go abroad they find their lives even more disrupted by status anxieties. The American official community, centered at the embassy, spends more time and effort than the Soviet KGB trying to discover who are the CIA families. If a CIA officer is assigned to the embassy under the guise of being in the Foreign Service, the U.S. Information Service, or the Agency for International Development, the real employees of these organizations ferret the CIA agents out and then take pains to treat them as second-class citizens.

The government employees who are "legitimate" embassy personnel don't speak to them at all. If they arrive at the embassy under deep cover, with no false identity, then not even the other CIA personnel speak to them.

There are several ways to deal with the problem of credentials. One is to rise above the woes of status anxiety. Another is to learn to laugh them off, even if they are painful. Unfortunately, however, a more common way of handling the trade-off between your cover and your status is to give up some of the first to get more of the second.

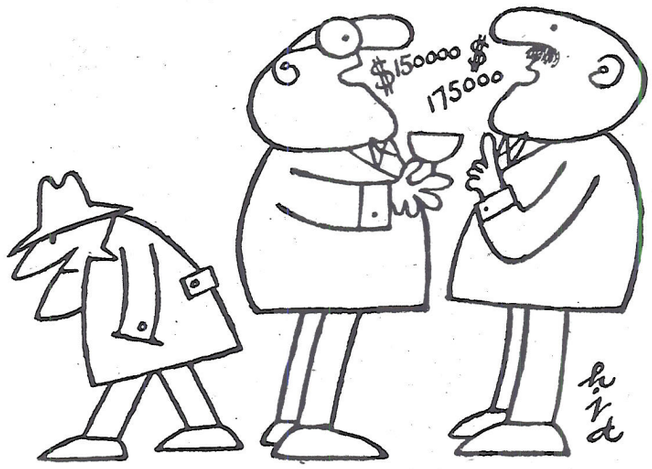
In foreign capitals CIA agents often have been so anxious for the natives and the diplomatic community to consider them important that they've made their secret jobs obvious — which has not only brought them envy, jealousy, and distrust, but has also made it very hard for them to do their job of intelligence-gathering properly.

"Do you know that CIA people are paid double salaries to serve abroad?" the new political officer in Singapore said to me when I showed him and his family around the Singapore Swimming Club on the Sunday after he arrived.

---

***Joseph Burkholder Smith was a high official of the CIA until he retired from the agency, after 25 years in it, in 1975.***

# OPINION




"They get paid twice as much as you or I do. They get paid for their cover jobs and then paid again for their hankypanky work. That's why they live better than we do."

I felt flattered that I was holding my cover well enough to be told this secret, and I only wished what he was saying were true.

But it was an impression that was understandable, if erroneous. CIA officers did serve in covers that were lower in rank than their real jobs, and, both on the job and off, they didn't live lives consistent with the rank they were pretending to have. For reasons of their jobs, agents cultivate contacts in the local government and other diplomatic missions in circles far higher than people of their cover rank ever have a chance to meet. And they insist on renting the kind of houses to which their CIA rank entitles them, as well as demanding and receiving a lot of special perquisites.

My new friend was wrong about the double salaries, but all the CIA officers he had seen abroad would certainly have given him the impression that he had about that rate of compensation.

In particular, most CIA station chiefs are not content to live in quarters much less grand than the ambassador's official residence. In many countries, this makes sense — the CIA has liaison responsibilities that are officially recognized by the ambassador and the State Department. But this is not appreciated by the lower-level employees of the embassy, if it's told to them at all. Resentment of the chief of station's lifestyle bubbles up.

In the past, many chiefs of state made no attempt to hide their preference for dealing with the CIA station rather than the ambassador — sometimes because they owed a great debt to the CIA, which may have stolen the election for them or financed the coup that put them in power.

In any case, CIA station chiefs have always felt they cannot entertain these men in hovels. It would be detrimental to the prestige and interests of the United States, they argue, if they did not have the rank and accoutrements of the foreigners with whom they deal. One station chief I knew in the 1950s got two grade promotions by this gambit. It has served many a CIA official well in regard to his housing.

Frank Snepp, in his book "Decent Interval," gives a vivid account of the perquisites agency personnel enjoyed in Vietnam. They had their own hotel, club, swimming pool, and cars. In the 1950s in Asia it was customary for CIA officers to have chauffeurs, too, on the rationale that you needed somebody around to guard CIA cars against looting.

Since the cars were government property, the gas and oil and maintenance costs, as well as the chauffeur, were paid for out of the station's housekeeping funds.

Even worse, perhaps, than using perquisites to fend off the pangs of status anxiety, is CIA people's tendency to huddle together. If the rest of the world thought we were nondescript Army officers and the like, well, we knew who was and wasn't who and could play the game with each other.

It's true that the greatest physical hazard many spooks have ever faced is the danger of choking on the pit of the olive in their martinis. But the greatest hazard we all face in life is not physical danger; it's having something eat away at our souls. No one has to be a clandestine operator, of course, but once he is, he is deprived of the normal means of sustaining his self-image that prevails in our society.

*Washington Monthly*

S.F. Sunday Examiner & Chronicle