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Editors Upset By CIA Use Of Reporters

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Should the Central Intelligence Agency be using American news reporters as part-time spies? The question arose again Thursday in a confrontation between CIA Director Stansfield Turner and some of the nation's top newspaper editors.

Turner had addressed the convention of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. In a question-and-answer period, A.M. Rosenthal, executive editor of The New York Times, reminded Turner that his predecessor, George Bush, had issued an order in 1974 banning the CIA's use of American correspondents.

"Have you changed it?" Rosenthal asked.

"Yes," Turner replied. He insisted, however, that the change had been made in 1977 and was fully publicized at the time.

The change allowed the director to personally authorize exceptions to the ban. It was included in the CIA's international regulations adopted Nov. 30, 1977.

ON THREE OCCASIONS, Turner said, he

had given permission to the agency "to use journalists for intelligence purposes," although as things turned out none of the actions was carried out.

Turner said that under his authorization, three journalists had agreed to undertake intelligence assignments and underwent security checks. He added that Rep. Edward P. Boland, D-Mass, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, had reviewed the decision and "found it perfectly reasonable."

Rosenthal, with the support of several other editors, objected that such use of any reporter "casts into doubt the ethical and professional position of every American correspondent serving abroad," as well as endangering every correspondent's physical safety.

"How do foreigners know that any American correspondent is not one of your exceptions, particularly in danger areas?" he asked.

TURNER REPLIED that other nations use their journalists as intelligence agents. He added that he would be "ashamed if I had to rely on a law to protect my ethics."

Eugene Patterson of the St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times also objected to the CIA's use of reporters and promised to comment on the matter on his newspaper's editorial page.

Another of the editors told Turner that "some of us would like to have a private session with you and give you a short course in the role of the free press."

He asked Turner whether, if he were an editor, he would fire a reporter who complied with a request to take on a CIA intelligence assignment. Turner said he would not; the editor made it clear that he would.

THE ARGUMENT boiled down to a question of the editors' concept of a reporter's devotion to his job versus Turner's concept of any citizen's duty to serve his country if he was in a special position to perform a useful function — in this case, to do an intelligence job for the CIA.

In arguing his case, Turner seemed to expand the role he had in mind for the CIA's occasional use of journalists, to expand it at least from what most congressmen and journalists have had in mind in the past.

In earlier discussions of the matter, attention has generally focused on the possibility that the CIA might occasionally hire a reporter part time to share information that he obtained in the normal course of his work.

As Turner discussed the issue, however, he spoke of a hypothetical case in which a reporter might be in a unique position where

he or she could infiltrate a terrorist organization. Turner's example suggested actual espionage rather than the mere sharing of information.

CONGRESSIONAL SOURCES familiar with the three cases Turner mentioned likewise suggested that such assignments involved more than information sharing. While they would not repeat details of the cases, they gave a hypothetical example that they said could be considered similar to one of them.

For instance, said a staff aide, an American journalist working in a foreign country might happen to live next door to the Soviet military attache. And the CIA, so this example went, might ask the correspondent to

Reps. Boland and Les Aspin, D-Wis., chairman of the House Intelligence Oversight Subcommittee, both inquired into the three cases and concluded that Turner had not been abusing the loophole in the CIA regulations.

But the grilling that the editors gave Turner suggested that they will remain far from satisfied as long as even one American news reporter is employed by the CIA or as long as the director even retains the self-assigned right to use American reporters as part-time spies.