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SUBJECT Admiral Turner on Secrecy

DOUG FEISEL: There are a number of journalists who would gasp at the suggestion that the lot of the reporter these days is not unlike that of the CIA agent. After all, the spy's purpose in life is to do his work away from public scrutiny, to conceal rather than to reveal. The reporter's job is quite the opposite, supposedly. But on the other hand, not all of the reporter's work can be done in the open. Sometimes in order to reveal in the end it is necessary to conceal in the beginning. And there are those who believe that the reporter has no more right to keep his sources and methods to himself when a court of law demands them than the spy does when he is put into a similar situation.

Whether that comparison is just or right is open to debate. But recently the nation's top spy offered his views on the subject to a group of journalists. Barbara Porter was there.

BARBARA PORTER: CIA Director Stansfield Turner acknowledges that disclosure is a touchy issue in the intelligence community. Speaking to reporters at a recent National Press Club luncheon, he defended the right of the CIA to keep its operations secret. He also pointed an amiable, but somewhat accusing finger at the press.

DIRECTOR STANSFIELD TURNER: I have fallen into a daily habit of starting my day by reading your press clips. I do so almost holding my breath, however, waiting to see what new disclosure is going to uncover one or another of our intelligence sources. Sometimes it's a simple leak; sometimes it's one of our officers who had to testify in a court. Sometimes it's a subpoena for one of our documents or some of our notes.

PORTER: But Turner adds that the tables have turned a little bit and that actual parallels have developed between the need

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for secrecy in the intelligence world and the need to keep sources confidential in the journalistic community. He says he used to think of the press as his adversary.

DIRECTOR TURNER: That is, at least until recently when I began to perceive that, in reading the press, it was almost as likely to be you who were being hauled into court to defend your right for secrecy, or it was you who were being served these subpoenas for your notes or your documents.

PORTER: He says he hopes the court battles that have embroiled journalists in their fight to keep their sources confidential will give the press a better understanding of what the CIA must go through.

DIRECTOR TURNER: The problem of keeping secrets, of being able to preserve the anonymity of our sources is the number one problem of your United States intelligence community today.

PORTER: Turner says the question of disclosure has puzzled allied countries, even to the point where they're nervous about whether the U. S. can keep secrets or not.

DIRECTOR TURNER: I know that just recently a foreign intelligence service declined a joint covert action with us that would have been of great benefit to both countries. It did so when reminded that I must notify eight committees of the Congress of any covert action.

PORTER: Turner concludes that the press today is wrestling in the courts with a constitutional question while the CIA must wrangle with the Freedom of Information Act.

DIRECTOR TURNER: It consumed over a hundred man-years of Central Intelligence employee time, and much, much of that is wasted. We have so few requests that we can fulfill with respect to the number that come in because of the classification point of view that we spin our wheels having to be conscientious and review document after document and turning them down.

PORTER: He cites the example of how much time the agency, because of that act, had to spend answering the request of ex-CIA agent and writer of books on the intelligence community, Philip Agee.

DIRECTOR TURNER: We've consumed nine man-years just responding to one American -- I hate to call him an American -- citizen's request. One person. And every time we do anything or we have anything appear in the press, we get requests from certain organizations and we have to go through these in infinite detail.

PORTER: Turner is looking for Congress to bail the CIA out of some of the procedural hassles the Freedom of Information Act

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entails. He hopes while he's heading up the CIA that the press and the intelligence world base a friendly co-existence on the similarities of their situations.

DIRECTOR TURNER: The timid reporter never gets the big story. The timid intelligence operative does not take those risks which must be taken if he's to do his job.

PORTER: Otherwise Turner fears the agency will be reduced to intelligence by timidity.

Barbara Porter, Washington.

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