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The Klaus Barbie Affair

It's a classic theme of spy fiction and perhaps for real-life spies, too: the amorality of the espionage world, a gutter ethic in which all sides are ready to employ any means, no matter how corrupt. That is the theme that emerges from the official admission that U.S. military intelligence officers used the former Gestapo official Klaus Barbie as a paid informant for four years after World War II, shielded him from prosecution for war crimes committed during the Nazi occupation of France, and — after lying to their own government about his whereabouts — helped him assume a false identity and escape to South America.

When U.S. Counter-Intelligence Corps officers first hired Barbie, though they knew of his Gestapo affiliation, they had "no reliable indication" that he was wanted for war crimes. Therefore their decision was "defensible," a Justice Department report on the case concluded. But after the charges against him began to emerge in 1949, Barbie's American employers reached what the report calls a "calculated and indefensible decision to conceal C.I.C.'s own actions and to actively impede the lawful search for Barbie." Blame does not fall

directly on the U.S. government itself, which was deceived by its own officers who spirited Barbie out of Europe. Still, as a "matter of decency and of honorable conduct," in the words of the Justice Department's investigators, the U.S. has formally apologized to France for frustrating its prosecution of Barbie.

With that apology, in a sense, America's role in the Barbie case comes finally to an end. The statute of limitations has long since run out on any possible obstruction-of-justice charges against the handful of U.S. officers involved. It's worth remembering, though, that there is no statute of limitations on the ethical issues raised by the case. In the chilly world of intelligence operations and in other foreign-policy matters, too, indefensible actions are still rationalized on the grounds that the U.S. cannot be bound by ethical standards that are not observed by its adversaries, and that the ends of national security justify any means employed to defend it. The lesson to be derived from the Barbie affair is that means can compromise ends, and that our enemies have won if we let their values become ours.