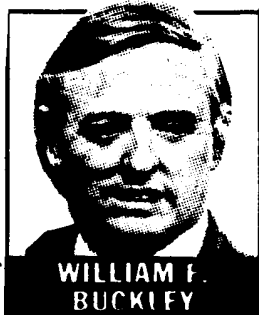


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# Sticks, stones, and sometimes words



I DOUBT there is anything one can't safely say about the President of the United States. Safely say, that is, without fear of adverse legal consequences.

The February issue of the Columbia Journalism Review carries a fascinating piece. Its author is identified as follows: "David Atlee Phillips was editor and publisher of The South Pacific Mail, in Santiago, Chile, when he was recruited by the CIA in 1950. He served with the agency for 25 years; at retirement he was chief of Latin American and Caribbean Operations."

Now Phillips became in 1975 a "public figure." On his resignation, he founded the Association of Former Intelligence Officers, and toured the country speaking and writing about the need for a robust intelligence service. He became a public figure.

A few years later, a gentleman called Anthony Summers wrote a book, published by Gollancz in London, called "Conspiracy." One of its theses was that a man called Maurice Bishop conspired with Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas shortly before the assassination of John F. Kennedy. And guess who "Maurice Bishop" was alleged to be in real life? Yawp: David Atlee Phillips.

Not only was there now a book pressing that thesis, the thesis was retailed in the London-based Observer, a newspaper of international standing. And McGraw-Hill published an American edition of "Conspiracy."

Things were warming up for Phillips. A press conference was called in Washington on June 25, 1980, convened by one Dr. William F. Pepper, who was introduced as a "distinguished lawyer, psychologist and educator." The thesis he presented: David Atlee Phillips had manipulated the murder in Washington of Salvador

Allende's former foreign minister, Orlando Letelier, and that Phillips had proceeded to steal documents from the dead man's briefcase, rejiggered them for disinformation purposes, and distributed them to the world.

In November 1980, Washingtonian magazine published an article, "Who Killed JFK?" The thesis? Phillips was "Maurice Bishop," the master planner of the assassination.

That did it, and Phillips sued, and lost, on the grounds that, as a public figure, he needed to prove actual malice. Needed to prove, that is, that all those people really knew that he WASN'T Maurice Bishop, President killer. And then Lawrence Hill & Co. of Westport, Conn., published a book called "Death in Washington," written by two free-lancers who were present at Dr. Pepper's press conference and were carried away by the thesis. Henry Holt published "Reasonable Doubt" by Henry Hurt, complete with the Maurice Bishop equals David Atlee Phillips yarn. And declined to permit Phillips to write 2,000 words to appear at the end of the book.

Things looked pretty black, but in February 1986 there was a ray of light. The authors and publisher of "Death in Washington" published a handsome retraction, and paid over money (the amount unspecified) to Phillips. Nobody has succeeded in finding Dr. Pepper after four years of effort. In London a year later, the High Court announced a resolution of a libel suit against The Observer: a retraction and substantial damages.

Phillips ends his account by asking, "Whatever happened to the Sigma Delta Chi Code of Ethics and its 'The news media should not communicate unofficial charges affecting reputation or moral character without giving the accused a chance to reply?'"

ONE SUPPOSES, resignedly, that there are those who believe that the CIA put Phillips up to the dirty business of resurrecting Sigma Delta Chi's Code of Ethics.