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Don't let a deal smear U.S. journalism

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A DEAL involving accused Soviet spy Gennady Zakharov is probably the only way to get American reporter Nicholas Daniloff out of that Moscow prison. But there are worrisome aspects to such a deal, and they ought to re-alert American journalistic institutions to the need to remain absolutely aloof from the nation's spy networks.

Even if Daniloff, a U.S. News & World Report correspondent, is allowed to come home, while Zakharov is eventually brought to trial, the "deal" will keep alive in a lot of totalitarian countries the notion that many American journalists are spies.

Leaders of a police-state mentality will say, "Daniloff must have been guilty of something," even though everything we know indicates that he is a victim of one of those "setups" for which the Soviet KGB is notorious.

Any "deal" that feeds the idea that U.S. journalists are tools of the CIA or other intelligence agencies is dangerous even to the point of being a death warrant for newsmen whose aggressiveness Americans depend on to give them some measure of truth about what is going on in the Soviet Union, China, South Africa, Chile and

many other nations.

In early 1980 President Jimmy Carter and his director of central intelligence, Stansfield Turner, erred grievously in their insistence that the CIA should occasionally turn journalists into spies.

Turner had sold Carter the spurious argument that journalists are "citizens first," and that if "national security" requires them to spy, then they must do their duty like everyone else.

Unfortunately, a few publishers and editors swallow this be-a-patriot hokum. So we have had just enough newsmen doubling as spies to lend some credence even to trumped-up KGB charges.

The world's freest press cannot remain free, at home or abroad, if we fall into the trap of cloak-and-dagger patriotism. That is because free, energetic, probing newsmen are not welcome anywhere — no, not even by the leaders of this democracy.

That is because good journalists, by definition, dig up and print or broadcast things that rulers and bureaucrats prefer not to have revealed.

I know that we will never convince the Kremlin that American newsmen are

not government agents, as are so many of the so-called Soviet reporters posted around the world.

No, the Soviets may not believe us, but it won't hurt for U.S. editors and publishers to say loudly, over and over, that their newsmen are forbidden to engage in intelligence activities, and that anyone found doing so will be drummed out of American journalism.

That surely would impress some world leaders. And it would leave American newsmen reasonably free to gather and write the information we must have if we are to make the right decisions on matters crucial to our survival as a democracy.