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Journalists as foreign spies

CIA Director Stansfield Turner doesn't see anything wrong with using American journalists for intelligence gathering in foreign countries. Turner is dead wrong.

He shows an amazing lack of sensitivity to the real function of journalists—in the modern world as well as in the framework of the Constitution.

Speaking to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington, Turner said he didn't understand why news organizations would object to their employees working secretly for the CIA.

He either doesn't understand or doesn't care that the slightest hint of CIA connections would make it extremely difficult for American foreign correspondents to operate overseas.

Journalists abroad, as in this country, spend a great deal of effort developing news sources. Often they are of an extremely confidential nature. If those sources suspect for a moment that the journalist is moonlighting as an American spy, the journalist will find his sources drying up quickly.

It is not unlike the all-too-frequent tendency in this country to haul journalists before secret grand juries to reveal sources behind stories they have written. Journalists and news organizations have fought that practice on the same ground—that it would destroy the journalist's credibility and dry up his news sources.

The use of American journalists to do the CIA's spying is an old story. In the wake of

congressional investigations of the CIA in the mid-1970s, then CIA Director George Bush adopted a rule prohibiting the agency from using full-time foreign correspondents in secret operations.

But shortly after Turner became CIA chief in 1977, he modified the rule to allow such use if it is approved by him. Since that time, he told the editors, he has approved three different plans. The journalists, he said, were willing but the plans fell through because circumstances didn't develop where the journalists could be used. Turner said he would not hesitate to do it again.

Turner calls this an opportunity for journalists to serve their country in circumstances which are "vitally important" to the nation. Clearly, only Turner will decide what is vitally important. This makes us extremely uneasy.

The Constitution's First Amendment carved out a special role for journalists—a role of freedom and independence from governmental restraints on their news gathering and writing activities. The Founding Fathers realized the importance of a free press if American society is to be free and open. They did not make any provision for journalists to function as foreign spies for the American government.

The CIA director and any other like-minded government functionaries should get this straight once and for all. Journalists are not an arm of the government either at home or abroad.