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Reporters as CIA agents? An alarming suggestion

Even if, as CIA Director Stansfield Turner told the American Society of Newspaper Editors at their annual meeting last week, it were desirable for journalists to double as agents for the Central Intelligence Agency when on assignment abroad, it surely made no sense to discuss that proposal in an open forum. Admiral Turner's standing before the editors of this country's newspapers to wave this particular red flag defies comprehension and common sense.

For argument's sake, grant that journalists would make superb undercover agents. Reporters are, after all, trained observers, and the nature of their business is an ideal cover for explaining their presence in hot spots and asking questions

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Just because of these factors, American intelligence agencies often ask journalists back from overseas assignment if they are willing to talk about the areas in which they have been. Some journalists do, others do not, depending on whether they feel such interviews might compromise their sources or their professional integrity.

But this is a far cry from asking a reporter to wear two hats and act as a hired gun for one's government. Any reporter who would put himself in such a position would immediately be embroiled in a hopeless conflict of interest. To which employer would he owe his primary allegiance? If to the government, then would he be willing to turn over all information (including the names of sources) to it? Would he be prepared to withhold some information from his newspaper, if the government should so ask? Would he even be prepared to plant false information in a story, if requested to do so "for the good of

his country?" Could a publisher or editor have any faith in the stories written by an agent with such a dual loyalty? Could readers trust anything they read, knowing that reporters might be writing what some government agency wanted them to write?

Admiral Turner, as head of the United States' most sensitive intelligence agency, has a natural desire and indeed a duty to seek out every source of information he can. One might understand, even while disagreeing, that in a fit of patriotic fervor he might be tempted to evade regulations and quietly recruit journalist-spies. But if the director entertains such heretical thoughts, it is incomprehensible that he would choose to advertise the fact before all the world.

What can come out of such a public debate as Admiral Turner generated in Washington last week, other than a crippling of both his own agency and of the American press? Other countries are now on official notice that any American newspaperman coming across their borders should automatically be considered as potentially a spy for the CIA.

American journalists may well find it harder henceforth to get visas to visit some countries. If they are let in, they may find doors closed to them that would otherwise have been open. They may be subjected to being followed or harassed, or even to being jailed and tried for espionage. And, given the tenor of the regimes in some countries, it is not unthinkable that Admiral Turner's own statement — that he is not willing to foreclose future operations involving journalists — might be used as evidence against them.

It is only an added irony that by grandstanding this issue, and so rendering the task of all American foreign correspondents more difficult, Admiral Turner may have helped turn off the flow of news from abroad to the American press and electronic media. Should that be the result, he will have thereby reduced the value of one of his agency's most prolific sources of information.