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Secrets, Spies and Editors in Cold War America:

Ben Bradlee and the *Washington Post*

This essay considers secrets, spies and newspaper editors specifically in the context of the CIA. Ben Bradlee, long-serving editor of the *Washington Post*, and one of America's most iconic journalists, is examined here in detail. Bradlee spent much time reflecting on what the appropriate relationship between spies and the media should be and this is captured in his correspondence. It argues that because the tensions between national security secrets and a free press were often negotiated informally through personal networks, this terrain is best analysed using ideas borrowed from social history. Editors were often wily mediators between Washington's twin worlds of secrecy and publicity. It also suggests that in considering the CIA and the press, we need to give a little less attention to intrepid reporters and more attention to editors and owners who exercised more power. Overall, this realm is one of human relationships, best viewed not through the prism of policy documents, but through private papers or interviews.

Washington Post editor Ben Bradlee enjoyed a complex and evolving relationship with the CIA during much of the Cold War - perhaps extending over more than thirty years. It is suggested here that this demonstrates how fruitful and indeed, perhaps necessary, a social history approach is to understand the relationship between the intelligence community and the press in the US during this period. Analysing Bradlee through the lens of social history contributes to a more refined understanding of these questions, not least because of the growing trend of amongst those studying society to move towards the methodology of life history (Lončar, Vučica, and Bubić 2019). Certainly, the relationships between Bradlee, James Angleton, Stansfield Turner, Bill Casey, and other luminary intelligence figures evolved over decades and constituted an extended narrative arc. Bradlee's reflections on the role of the editor as a mediator of secrecy were therefore the result of debating and deliberating this issue in *longue durée* and by the 1990s reflected both a continued faith in the Fourth Estate but also a certain scepticism.

Cold War History and the CIA

The long history of the Cold War had traditionally focused on an elite narrative about two competing blocs divided by Europe's Iron Curtain. But over the last twenty years, the subject has 'broken out' in important respects, not least through a 'cultural turn'. It has explored the importance of art, music and literature as part of a wider Cold War that was more a battle of ideas – even lifestyles – than it was a struggle for geographical territory. Accordingly, we have seen books about jazz, abstract art, novels, film, poetry as components of the Cold War, often involving CIA intervention through 'state-private networks' (Laville 2001; Lucas 1999; Wilford 2008; Shaw 2010). The landmark book was *Who Pays the Piper*, by Frances Stonor Saunders, and although it was by no means the first, or the last word on this subject, it is now part of a complex field of contestation (Saunders 2000). While this turn is welcome, these

works confront researchers with difficult questions, not least about the boundaries of our field. Today, a sophisticated general history of the CIA and Cold War would touch upon almost everything, since the study of what was once a specific East-West struggle has become intertwined with the history of the global south, with colonialism, cultural history, with science and technology - and perhaps even the history of modernity itself.

Much of this new works shows that the CIA was more complex and important than we thought. Simon Willmetts articulates this most elegantly, observing that the CIA is increasingly emblematic of American foreign policy, even of America as a whole (Willmetts 2016, 12). As a result, more scholarly attention is being devoted to representations of the CIA. It is a boom industry and so we have recently seen two excellent analyses of the CIA and Hollywood (Jenkins 2015; Willmetts 2016). We have seen an important account of the CIA's battles with its own memoirists (Moran, 2017). There has also been a flurry of impressive studies of journalism. David Hadley has examined the media and the early years of the CIA, commenting on how the press was able to influence the CIA from its foundation 'in often unacknowledged ways'. Hadley, along with Matthew Jones, has given welcome attention to editors and owners (Hadley 2019, Jones 2015). David McCarthy offers a more synoptic overview of CIA media strategies designed to maintain its culture of secrecy, but also expands his lens to talk about the film liaison office and Hollywood. Rather darkly, he concludes that CIA has implemented a public relations strategy 'that directly threatens American democracy' (McCarthy 2018, 136).

Not all the writing on the CIA and the press is new. A time-honoured school sees the press as an additional form of intelligence oversight. Loch Johnson penned a pioneering essay that characterised the media as the 'shock troops of accountability', arguing that the investigations of reporters were often followed up by formal committees on Capitol Hill (1986). This was buttressed by Katherine Olmsted's in-depth study of the work of the reporter Seymour Hersh and his impact on the post-Watergate 'Season of Inquiry' during the 1970s (Olmsted 2000). There is certainly as case for viewing the press as a form of regulation by revelation in the realm of intelligence – the Fourth Estate - and this, in turn, raises interesting questions about disciplines and methods.

Any study of the CIA is challenging, but the study of the CIA and the press is especially demanding because it crosses disciplinary boundaries. Hitherto we have tended to use the traditional tools and sources of the Cold War historian. We perhaps need a more social, personal and biographical methodology to examine this subject. This path has already been charted to some degree. One of the better books on this subject is Greg Herken's study of the *Georgetown Set*, even though it is billed neither as a study of the CIA nor the press and is in fact largely a biography of Cold War zealot and CIA outrider Joseph Alsop (2015).

Accordingly, this article seeks to make a case for a social approach to intelligence history, and perhaps more widely, national security history. Ben Bradlee's world, the realm of the 'Georgetown Set' was a strange entity, home to the good and the great, and the former great in government - together with those in journalism. In Georgetown, dinner parties were simply business after hours, 'a form of government by invitation' and almost an extension of the Oval Office. A more sophisticated understanding of American intelligence, and specifically its relation with the press, in the Cold War era requires careful attention to the Georgetown Set and the trajectories of those within its orbit (Yardley 2014).

In other words, Herken shows that individuals and their social connections matter. Similarly, the study of *Cold War Captives* by Susan Carruthers also potentially points the way ahead to a more personal approach (2009). We might also consider Evan Thomas, whose early book, *The Very Best Men* (1996) focused on the Georgetown Set. The biographical and autobiographical literature on this circle, focusing mostly on reporters like Joe Alsop is notably strong (Yoder 1995; Merry 1997). Here, in this essay, similar methods are used to examine one of America's most celebrated newspaper editors, Ben Bradlee, whose papers provide insights into the dilemmas of an editor dealing with late Cold War secrecy.

Ben Bradlee and the CIA

In 1979, Ben Bradlee, the iconic editor of the *Washington Post*, was accused of being an agent of the CIA. The medium was a sensational biography of his boss Kay Graham, owner of newspaper. Written by Deborah Davis, it argued that the rise of the *Washington Post* and then the revelations of Watergate, leading to the fall of President Nixon, were nothing less than a vast CIA plot that had been in train for more than twenty years – with Bradlee at its centre. Davis insisted that the late Allen Dulles had been close friends with Kay Graham and her late husband Phil Graham and that the rapid rise of the *Washington Post* from what had been essentially a local newspaper was an undercover operation. She suggested that Phil Graham was hoping for a way to subsidise the cost of foreign correspondents. Meanwhile Allen Dulles, as head of the CIA in the late 1950s, was looking for better cover for operatives. Davis argued that the *Post* pioneered the scheme and that it spread to other newspapers. Davis claimed this operation was called “Operation Mockingbird” and was run by Cord Meyer (Davis, 1979). Even in the wake of Watergate, this was a wild suggestion of domestic interference.

Remarkably, Davis even claimed to name ‘Deep Throat’ the source of Watergate expose. She pointed to a CIA officer called Richard Ober who had been a senior figure in the special operations branch and had been close to James Jesus Angleton and Richard Helms. The Watergate scoop was, she insisted, given the paper as part of a developing war between the CIA's Richard Helms and President Nixon. She claimed that Ober was a Harvard classmate of Bradlee and that Helms and Bradlee were childhood friends. Not only was the CIA paying Bradlee back, she argued, for many espionage services rendered but also this was part of their plot to further elevate the *Post*. Although little short of conspiracy theory, the book was produced by a prestigious publisher, Jovanovich, Harcourt and Brace and so carried some weight (Davis 1979, Doc.1/1996).

‘Jesus, that really pissed me off,’ recalled Bradlee, adding that the book ‘made my life very hard’ Encouraged by Katherine Graham, Bradlee put together a list of some thirty-nine false allegations and inaccuracies. He sent these to the publisher, Bill Jovanovich, hinting at legal action. Bradlee admitted the irony of a champion of press freedom considering legal action to stop a book. The author did not take the complaints especially seriously, but the publisher did. In an unprecedented move, Jovanovich withdrew the book, insisting that it be returned from bookstores and then pulped approximately 25,000 copies. On 4 February 1980, Bill Jovanovich assured Bradlee that *Katherine the Great* was ‘dormant’ if not yet entirely ‘dead’ (Doc.2/1980). Apologising profusely, he added, that it had been ‘a bitter lesson for him’, since he was now being confronted with accusations of censorship and editorial blackmail (Doc.3/1980). Davis later won a sizeable settlement from Jovanovich, and eventually re-issued

the book with a bespoke publisher, albeit with significant changes (Davis 1991; Herken 2015, 386).

Was Bradlee working for the CIA? The simple answer is no, he had merely been a press attaché in Paris for a few years in the 1950s. Bradlee was not recruited by the CIA, but fascinatingly, for forty years, the CIA was part of his social world and it was all around him. Indeed, he effectively married into the CIA. In 1954, two sisters, Mary and Toni Pinchot, both members of the Washington society crowd, visited Paris. Bradlee fell in love with Toni Pinchot while her free-spirited sister, Mary enjoyed a brief affair with an Italian painter. Both Bradlee and Toni Pinchot were married with children but soon divorced in favour of their new partners. Meanwhile Mary Pinchot was married to Cord Meyer, who had been president of the World Federalist movement and who was now prominent in the CIA. Moreover, the two sisters were close friends with Cicely Angleton, the wife of CIA luminary James Jesus Angleton (Herken 2015, 159, 267).

Somewhat later, the CIA flagged up Bradlee as a rising star and a candidate for recruitment by its Domestic Contacts Division. But when the CIA had a close look at Bradlee they backed away. Their own spies had him figured as ‘an unscrupulous, ambitious individual who has no sense of security and little sense of discretion. He is in constant personal and financial difficulties, drinks heavily, talks too much and is emotionally unstable.’ They had also identified him as an energetic womanizer. Most importantly, they said, he would do anything to anyone in order to deliver a good story. The last line of the CIA assessment is one that Bradlee would probably have been rather proud of (doc/foia). Whatever his complex pattern of friendships, Bradlee was always working for the *Post*.

Bradlee’s time at the *Post*, which lasted almost thirty years, beginning in 1965, was inevitably perhaps, a journey of disillusionment with intelligence. Across Georgetown and beyond, there were friends and even family who were ‘in the business’. He was always reaching for a personal relationship to facilitate a measured conversation about the boundaries of secrecy and openness, but his time in management was often punctuated by reverses and lessons in the growing importance of the law. Bradlee nurtured his own romantic vision of the CIA and saw it as an information machine, not unlike the *Post*, and so he was happy to help with a little espionage, but saw participation in propaganda and covert action as beyond the pale, certainly for the professional journalist in the field. Overall, Bradlee conceived of himself as a patriot and, perhaps uniquely, spent hours explaining this in personal letters to his readers, but was frustrated when government officials failed to share that self-image.

Like many witnessing the collapse of Cold War consensus, Bradlee gradually travelled the road towards greater scepticism of government. Assessing each story on its own merits, Bradlee was sometimes a CIA source or collaborator, also a critical friend, sometimes an enemy (Herman 1996). Most importantly, much of this was filtered through friendships. Bradlee illustrates the growing complexity of social relations between the CIA and the media in Washington over several decades. Not only was he close to Cord Meyer and Jesus James Angleton, he was also friendly with Wistar Janny, another senior CIA officer. Together with figures like Joe Alsop, they were part of the ‘Georgetown Set’, and as others have observed, they did not need to ring each other up to share stories, since they were rarely out of each other’s dining rooms (Merry 1997). But Bradlee’s difficulties with the CIA multiplied over time as the social village that was Georgetown, was replaced by a more widely distributed

bureaucratic jungle during the 1980s. Issues of secrecy versus openness could no longer be cleared up over cocktails and instead Bradley and his colleagues faced threats of prosecution.

Bradlee and JFK

Prior to the election of 1960, Bradley and his wife Toni were close to JFK and Jackie Kennedy. Living only doors away in Georgetown and with children of similar ages, it was a natural friendship. They would often go to the movies and dinner as a foursome. Yet Bradley was also conscious that this young senator was a presidential candidate and so he was carefully writing everything up in a private notebook. He later confessed that he was a reporter to his core because if I had ‘been less of a newspaperman, I would have been more of a friend’ (Himmelman 2012, 84-5). During the transition to his presidency, as he looked to build Camelot, JFK asked Bradley and a colleague what changes they would make to leadership around Washington. They quickly replied that they would replace both J. Edgar Hoover and Allen Dulles, respectively the heads of the FBI and CIA – with Bradley adding that he thought the CIA lacked any meaningful oversight. Conspicuously, these figures remained in place (Bradlee 1996, 212-3).

At this point Bradley was head of the Washington bureau for *Newsweek* magazine, a publication bought by the *Post* in 1965. Bradley had tried to build trust with JFK by helping him dispel rumours of a previous secret marriage, based on ‘eyes only’ FBI material that Bradley had been shown by the White House. Nevertheless, JFK was wary and the friendship remained precarious. Bradley claims he knew that the president had a roving eye, but was adamant that he knew little about the scale of Kennedy’s affairs until after his assassination (Bradlee 1996, 216-7, 230-1). However, his wife Toni later conceded that JFK had made a pass at her during an especially festive 46th birthday party in 1963. The death of JFK in Texas in November 1963 affected them both deeply (Bernstein 2011).

One dreadful event followed another. Less than a year after the death of Kennedy, Bradley received a sudden phone call from Wistar Janney, another neighbour who worked at the CIA and who was a close friend of Cord Meyer. Bradley’s sister in law, Mary Pinchot Meyer had been found murdered while walking along a canal tow path near her home in central Washington. Someone was arrested not far from the scene, but was eventually acquitted. Mary, a painter and an artist, was having a long-term relationship with Kennedy, one that was more serious and sustained than some of his other dalliances. Reportedly, she had introduced JFK to a range of alternative ideas about life and to smoking cannabis (Bernstein 2011).

Mary Meyer was also a dedicated diary keeper. She had left firm instructions with a friend that in the event of her demise, her diary should be destroyed. Accounts differ of the days following her death but it appears that Bradley and his wife Toni went to look for the diary and upon entering the house found that James Jesus Angleton, the CIA counter-intelligence expert, was already inside looking for it. Later in the day they returned to search the studio at the back of the house and found Angleton there again, this time trying to pick the lock. He was asked to leave. Later when they found the diary it was handed to Angleton for safe destruction. But Angleton, apparently, did not destroy the diary (Bernstein 2011). Some claim the diary was actually more a painter’s notebook with colour swatches and while it contained

some brief references an affair, there was nothing revelatory. What is clear is that Bradlee was not especially honest or forthcoming during the court case against the suspect and changed his story down the years. He confessed himself 'extremely uncomfortable' when news of the affair emerged in the press a decade later (Bradlee 1996, 270). This was one story with links to the CIA that Bradlee strove to keep out of the public eye.

Bradlee's friendship with Angleton survived this incident but was ruptured by his reporting on the British intelligence traitor Kim Philby. When Kim Philby's mischievous memoir appeared in 1968, Bradlee was fascinated. Angleton, he recalled, 'never forgave me for a story I wrote about Kim Philby's book, describing Kim Philby's last meal in Washington - with Jim' (Doc.4/1979). Over the next two decades, Bradlee and Angleton circled around each other warily, communicating through friends or the occasional letter, but avoiding what Bradlee called 'eyeball to eyeball' contact (Doc.5/1980). It probably did not help that the *Post* ran a story entitled 'Angleton probed as a mole'. One of Bradlee's colleagues, David Martin had picked up that a special spy-hunting unit had made the suggestions. When asked about this, the CIA press officer was oblique simply replying that 'this was before our time here' (Doc.6/1979). Martin, eventually wrote a book about Angleton called *Wilderness of Mirrors*. Angleton had given him interviews but hated the book, insisting it was 'grotesque' and 'highly falsified' (Doc.7/1980). Angleton and Bradlee never resumed real contact.

Between 1963 and 1965, Bradlee and his wife confronted the violent deaths of no less than four friends and colleagues, all with firearms including Frank Wisner the pioneer of CIA covert action. The passing that re-shaped Bradlee's world most radically was that of Phil Graham, who had served as publisher and later co-owner of *The Washington Post* and its parent body, The Washington Post Company. He had battled bipolar disorder for many years and suffered from alcoholism. Graham was a combative figure but he had helped the paper grow into a highly successful publication, buying other newspapers as well as radio and television stations, which were highly profitable, including *Newsweek*. On his death, to the surprise of many, his wife Kay took over as *de facto* publisher, making her the first woman in charge of a major American newspaper. Kay Graham and Bradlee would be active partners into the 1970s and the 1980s.

Pentagon and Watergate

The ascent of the *Post* was accelerated by two media sensations: The Pentagon Papers and Watergate. The Pentagon Papers increased Ben Bradlee's stature among journalists, and established a firm legal platform for national security whistle-blowing, but it was the Watergate affair made him into a household name. Two junior *Post* reporters, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, investigated the break-in at Democratic National Committee (DNC) headquarters and implicated President Richard Nixon, resulting in his resignation. This alerted Bradlee to the importance of intelligence and thereafter, a team consisting of Woodward, and several others worked together as a team at the *Post* to investigate the CIA for the next twenty years.

These events have been celebrated in celluloid. In 2017, Stephen Spielberg made a film about the Pentagon Papers called *The Post*, which starred Meryl Streep as Kay Graham and Tom Hanks as Bradlee. Although at first glance, this story had no CIA angle, it was nevertheless of real importance for the agency which was anxious to protect official secrecy at

all costs, for fear the floodgates would open. The Pentagon Papers constituted a vast secret internal history of American involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967. It was smuggled out and photocopied by Daniel Ellsberg, who had worked on the study. Initially published in the *New York Times*, it showed that Johnson administration had systematically lied to the public and to Congress about the prospects of success in Vietnam. It also revealed much about the secret wars in Cambodia and Laos.

The *Post* then took up the baton. Provided with an additional copy of the Pentagon Papers, it worked round the clock and then began publishing the story. Bradlee was rung up on Friday 18 June 1971, by Assistant Attorney General William H. Rehnquist and personally threatened with prosecution under the Espionage Act, a blunt legal instrument from the First World War that was meant for enemy spies. Bradlee was shocked, since ‘the charge of espionage did not fit my vision of myself’. He knew that criminal charges were serious, but said he would not comply. He recalls that his ‘hands and legs were shaking’ (Bradlee 1996, 317-8). Bradlee and Graham went ahead despite the extreme anxiety of their lawyers and their management board – since the *Post* was in the middle of a stock market floatation - and were eventually vindicated in by the Supreme Court. Justice Black’s opinion was resounding: ‘The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people’ (NYT 1971). This verdict was of the first importance for the CIA over the next ten years, indeed over several decades, as the Agency became engulfed in a range of free speech legal cases with journalists and indeed its own employees (Moran 2015).

On 18 June 1972, the *Post* began to probe a burglary at the office of Democratic National Committee in the Watergate office suite in Washington, DC. Local security officers had disturbed and then arrested a group of men – latterly known as ‘The Plumbers’ – who were trying to copy documents and plant listening devices in the offices. They were called ‘The Plumbers’ because their jobs included dealing with leaks, and one of their tasks had been to burgle the office of Daniel Ellsberg’s psychiatrist in search of compromising material. Initially, it was not seen as a big story, and so it was handed to two of the *Post*’s most junior reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. They worked away and uncovered a bigger story.

For months, Bernstein and Woodward had felt isolated in pursuing the story. The turning point was March 1973 when they realised that FBI privately knew of senior involvement by the White House, but enormous pressure had been placed on officials not to speak. On 23 March 1973, James McCord, a key defendant and former CIA officer broke the silence when he blew the whistle to the judge heading the inquiry. Dramatically, he explained that he feared for his life and was worried about talking to either the FBI or the Department of Justice. He revealed that many had committed perjury during the trial and others were involved who were too scared to speak. This was the end of the *Post*’s solo mission, and from then on, the entire national press corps was in pursuit of the full story, meanwhile White House officials gradually turned on each other in an attempt to avoid prison (Himmelman 2012, 234-6). Nixon resigned to avoid impeachment in August 1974.

The following summer, Woodward and Bernstein published *All the President's Men*, a bestselling account of the investigation that had now won them a Pulitzer prize. Watergate also turned Bradlee into a star of the silver screen. In 1975, the phone rang and Robert Redford asked permission to turn *All the President's Men* into a film. Ironically, Bradlee had not actually had that much to do with the Watergate investigation. He had been luke-warm about

his underlings Woodward and Bernstein, and indeed the story. In fact, a junior manager called Howard Simon, who enjoyed not even a momentary glimpse in the film had been instrumental in urging them on. Even more remarkably, Kay Graham, having given her permission for the film, then attempted to retract it and stop production. But once the film appeared to international acclaim, they U-turned a second time and were delighted to bask in the limelight (Felsenthal 1999).

Bradlee's own reflections on Watergate are intriguing. His overwhelming reaction was amazement that Nixon's team were 'that dumb' and did something repeatedly that was likely to result in them being caught. Privately, he felt that the investigation had achieved a prominence that it did not really deserve, because the consequences were the resignation of a president. Neither Bradlee nor Kay Graham had remotely expected this and were shocked by the outcome. A decade later, Bradlee judged that the Reagan-era Iran-Contra Affair was a much more significant violation. 'Watergate really was dirty tricks and arrogance and people thinking they were all-powerful could ride roughshod over civil liberties, but it wasn't dealing smuggled arms and buying foreign nations and shit like that' (Himmelman 2012, 212).

Bradlee therefore came to Watergate rather late. Nevertheless, he eventually demonstrated his superb editorial instincts and kept hunting. On 27 May 1980, he put a belated question to Helms, having noted noting that Gordon Liddy had now asserted that the CIA actually prepared the charts for the Watergate burglary. Bradlee clearly did not believe Helm's assertion that he had no advanced knowledge of Watergate. Bradley used the opportunity to philosophise on 'something that that has always haunted me' and something that he had discussed with every CIA director he had ever known 'which was all of them'. He asked Helms 'how can any director of any organisation where secrecy is so overwhelmingly important, be sure he knows everything that is going on? plainly, no one can be sure?' Bradlee felt confident enough to assert that 'things have been going on that directors did not know about' (Doc.8/1980). Helms did not have an answer - as his successors would later confirm that this was very much the case.

Bernstein's Bombshell

In early 1977, the *Post* revealed that King Hussein of Jordan was a long-term CIA agent. He had been paid over a million dollars, a sum that had been used for a variety of purposes, including 'procuring women'. For the first time, Bradlee encountered push back from his readers. Some complained that this coverage constituted an 'effort to sabotage' the recent Middle East peace talks between Sadat, Arafat and Hussein (Doc.9/1977). Others accused him of pedalling a new kind of intelligence 'pornography' (Doc.10/1977). Bradlee continued his long-standing practice of taking time to respond in writing to individual readers, explaining in detail his editorial policy on national security issues and emphasising legality. Bradlee replied that the Senate Oversight Committee and indeed the CIA General Counsel had had deemed the payments an impropriety and that President Carter had denied all knowledge. He added: 'Have you noticed that there has been no complaint from Sadat [Egypt], none from Assad [Syria], none from Nimeiri [Sudan]? Certainly, none for the Saudis? I suspect that they too have been on the take from the CIA, but that is another story' (Doc.11/1977).

The King Hussein spectacular had also given him a taste of direct presidential pressure. Summoned to the White House, he was asked not to publish. Carter had conceded that there was no direct threat to national security, but explained that his Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance was, even as they spoke, *en route* to the Middle East as part of a delicate peace process. This, he insisted would be jeopardised. Bradlee promised Carter that he would reflect on this - but published anyway.

The main thing on Bradlee's mind in 1977 was the CIA's relations with journalists. Over the last year, numerous general inquiries had raised the issue of collusion. But in October 1977, George Chaplin the President of the Society of American Newspaper Editors asked Daniel Inouye, chair of the Senate Committee on Intelligence to investigate the question specifically, adding: 'American journalists are frequently under attack in socialist and third world countries with false charges that American journalists are collaborators with their intelligence establishment.' He was not only concerned to achieve better protection from suspicion for American journalists, but also to prevent 'the use of foreign journalists by the CIA' which they felt reflected adversely on the credibility of journalists generally (Doc.12/1977).

On 6 December 1977, Senator Boland asked Bradlee and his staff to participate in the hearings. He assured Bradlee that his purpose was not 'to find out who is, or has been on the payroll of the CIA or to seek out any scandals'. Instead, it was to look to the future and ask what the relationship should be and how could it be framed so that 'it is less susceptible to suspicion and criticism?' (Doc.13/1977) Bradlee was keen to know their findings, but did not want to appear. 'We have an ironclad policy against testifying before congressional committees. We are reporters of history, or at least we should be. We should not be involved in the process that we are covering.' Nevertheless, he added that the CIA relationship with the press 'interests the hell out of us' and so he assured them, the *Post* would be covering the hearings closely (Doc.14/1977).

The Intelligence Subcommittee held three hot days of testimony on the links between the CIA and the press. William Colby, a recently retired DCI, insisted that the idea that CIA dominated US media output was 'a myth' (Richards 1977a). Most witnesses agreed that many journalists sought information from local CIA station chiefs and offered their own impressions in return – a *quid pro quo* - and few on either side of the fence saw this as a problem. Some American journalists who gave testimony felt it was the duty of a US journalist to plant false stories or work as a paid agent of the CIA if required. Others, including former US ambassadors felt they should stay away from each other since 'it's a question of working for two masters' (Richard 1977b).

Planting material was clearly problematic for many. Officials admitted that they were increasingly aware of the problem of 'feedback' into the domestic media and so when the CIA planted a false story abroad, they normally warned both US journalists and even allies. But the agency accepted that ultimately 'there was little way to tell if bogus stories made their way back into US publications'. Three former ambassadors acknowledged that serious mistakes had been made with covert propaganda programmes. They added that the CIA had 'spent large amounts of time and money planting false commissioned stories in English language newspapers abroad and even purchased several of the papers'. But they now felt they were not an effective propaganda tool and indeed some called them 'a joke'. There was little agreement. Les Aspin

noted that the only area of consensus was that regulation was unlikely ever to end the informal association of journalists and US intelligence gathering aboard – since they were largely doing the same job (Richard 1977b).

The CIA-press issue now seemed settled – but it was not. A year later, Carl Bernstein, still basking in the glory of Watergate, published a landmark article in *Rolling Stone* magazine alleging that the CIA were nothing less than the puppet masters of the press. This was not so much a story as a twenty-page essay alleging wide-ranging and systematic penetration of the media by the CIA. His considerable post-Watergate stature was underlined by the fact that he was paid an astonishing \$30,000 dollars for the essay. Both his parents were involved in far-left social movements and had been persecuted by McCarthy, he therefore came with a determinedly “deep state’ view of Washington.

Bernstein alleged that more than 400 journalists had worked for the CIA over the last 25 years. He denounced the Senate inquiry as deliberately misleading. He insisted that by far the most valuable relationship was with the *New York Times*, adding that the former publisher Arthur Hays Sulzberger had approved an arrangement whereby about ten CIA agents were given 'cover' jobs as employees on the paper between 1950 and 1966. As a result, The *New York Times* began its own investigation (Jones 2015). Bernstein tried to do a follow up article, inviting Dick Helms to participate but receiving a humorous reply from Helms who observed tartly that, given the huge sum the magazine had paid for the article, he was hardly surprised that Bernstein wanted to repeat the assignment.

There were furious responses. Sulzberger flatly denied the assertions, insisting that 'any allegation that I ever worked in any capacity for the CIA is false' - nor had he ever gathered specific information overseas at the requests of the CIA. For years afterwards, Sulzberger tried to extricate himself, even asking Bradlee about writing an exculpatory piece for the *Post* about the CIA hilariously entitled ‘Scraping off the Mud’. Sulzberger claimed that Harrison Salisbury and other colleagues on the *New York Times* had behaved 'irresponsibly'. But he was adamant that in no way, was he ever paid or working for the CIA or any other such organisation'. He was anxious because he now spent half the year in Greece and there the far left had recently assassinated a CIA station chief called Richard Welch (Doc.15 1981). But Bradlee rejected Sulzberger’s offer of an exculpatory article and remained suspicious. Indeed, he thought evasive wording of the CIA denial that Sulzberger had obtained through former DCI John McCone to be laughable, adding that the text would not persuade ‘some cynical bastard like myself’ (Doc.16/1981).

Not everyone was on the run. Joe Alsop, a member of the ‘Georgetown Set’ and media aristocracy, responded 'if you have a chance to help your country, it’s your job to do so'. The Alsop brothers were both identified in CIA files as having been given 'specific tasks' as reporters. William Sheehan, a senior vice president of ABC news, said that he had investigated this issue and had talked with former ABC news executives and had reached the confident conclusion 'there was no arrangement by this company to provide cover for the CIA'. Some journalists like Walter Cronkite were fingered by others as CIA moles, but furiously denied it. As Daniel Schorr correctly explained, what often led to the confusion was the habit of CIA station chiefs of ‘bigging’ up their reports by referring to casual chats with correspondents as 'sources'. The correspondent’s names then went into agency files with codenames. This was

common practice around the world since the numbers of agents recruited was a measure of performance and helped with promotion (Schorr 1996).

Bernstein's story created the impression in some quarters of large-scale CIA manipulation of the American media. But Colby's figure of 50 journalists is more accurate. Although it is likely that a lot of CIA officers used journalistic cover, the papers were mostly second grade outlets. By the mid-1960s, the majority of journalists who worked with the CIA, or who were agents, were either stringers or foreigners. By 1975, CIA relations with the mainstream American media mostly consisted of journalists and CIA officers briefing each other, which remained common - but was increasingly seen as risky (Doc.17/1977).

Bradlee had already asked Colby about the connections between the CIA and the *Post*. He phrased the questions carefully, inquiring not only about people on the staff but also stringers, asking him not only about the present situation but also to look back over a decade. Colby replied: 'I can assure you that no-one now on the staff on the *Washington Post* has a connection with the Central Intelligence Agency. A review of our files failed to reveal any such connections within the last ten years. It has been my policy not to comment on Agency relationships with stringers' (Doc.18/1976).

Oddly, at the very moment when Bradlee became more concerned about press links to intelligence agencies, his own family ties became stronger. In 1978, he divorced his wife Toni, and he then married Sally Quinn, a *Post* society reporter many years his junior. Kay Graham had fired other members of her staff for the same offence, but because it was the legendary Ben Bradlee this was overlooked. Sally Quinn's father, General William Quinn had commanded the Strategic Services Unit, the post-war element of OSS that formed the nucleus of the early CIA (Himmelman 2012, 264-5). Later, Quinn had become Deputy Director of the newly-created Defence Intelligence Agency. Again, one has a sense that the most delicate questions that Bradlee wanted to ask could simply be answered over the family dinner table (Doc.19/1977).

Confronting Casey

In 1980s, Ronald Reagan had promised on the electoral hustings that, if elected, he would 'unleash the CIA'. The following year he arrived in office and appointed his campaign manager, William Casey, an OSS veteran as CIA Director. Both Reagan and Casey were keen to ramp up covert action. Casey was old school and nurtured a dislike of the press. On 27 March 1981, Casey took a personal decision to end the program of background briefing for journalists by CIA analysts. His official reason was that 'it was an imposition on analysts time' but more likely it reflected his desire to distance the agency from the press and indeed he even talked about winding up the Public Affairs office altogether. Casey was forced to reverse his position within months (AP 1981, Hulnick, 2009).

Casey disliked the press but soon had a particular reason to hate the *Post*. Bradlee now commanded an Investigation Unit specialising in intelligence which he referred to as 'The SWAT team' (Bradlee 1996, 465). This included the reporters Bob Woodward, Jane

Amsterdam and Patrick Tyler. Their main target at this time was Max Hugel, a close friend of Casey. Hugel joined the CIA in January 1981 as Casey's special assistant, and was soon appointed to the role of Deputy Director for Operations, the head of the CIA's Clandestine Service. Hugel had a rather brash style and was brought in by Casey to shake things up in the Clandestine Service, but for those very same reasons he was not widely liked in the Agency. A year before, when Casey managed Reagan election campaign, Hugel had been his deputy, a task to which he was better suited. In July 1981, the *Post* aired allegations by two former business friends of insider trading during Hugel's time with a company called Brother International. Hugel resigned from the CIA the same day - while strenuously denying the allegations. He later sued the *Post* and won. This episode did not endear Bradley and his team to Casey whose relationship with Hugel was described as 'like father and son'. Intriguing, there is no mention at all of this major episode - or even Hugel's name - in Bradley's memoir (Taubman 1981).

Undeterred, and at Bradley's suggestion, Woodward now began a mammoth investigation into Reagan's covert action programme. This would eventually be published as the revelatory book entitled *Veil*. In fact, Woodward's project was much bigger than the impressive book he eventually published. Typically, Woodward had a "whole chapter" about Agency's payments to King Hussein that was intended for *Veil* but which never made the final cut. There was also extensive work on the NSA that detailed its successful penetration of Soviet cyphers during 1982 and 1983. Meanwhile, Bradley now had a staff of permanent intelligence experts. Although Woodward was not officially the *Post*'s 'CIA reporter', in practice it was in this decade that national newspapers came to regard the CIA as something that required focused attention. By the mid-1980s, the impressive reporter Walter Pincus had joined the team (Doc.20).

Although reinforced, Bradley was now working in a different atmosphere. In Reagan's new political climate, Bradley was often criticised for blowing secrets that violated national security. In order to push back, he was super vigilant for similar leaks by those in authority. In May 1984, Senator Jesse Helms blurted out that the CIA had 'bought' the election of El Salvador for Jose Napoleon Duarte. Ben Bradley told the Attorney General: 'I am now trying to remember an apparent national security violation as significant as the recent violation by Senator Jesse Helms'. Cheekily, he directly asked if the Attorney General knew of any others examples? (Doc.21/1984) Artfully dodging the question, the government's top legal officer responded that he was 'heartened' by Bradley's new-found interest in stiffening up national security (Doc.22/1984). Jesse Helms himself enjoyed the joke and asked Bradley 'have you turned yourself into the Attorney General?' (Doc.23/1985, Doc.24/1985).

By contrast, Casey was not in a mood to jest. He was fighting several covert wars: one against leftist regimes like Nicaragua in Central America, a second against the Soviets in Afghanistan, a third one against the Cubans in Angola and a fourth against terrorists in the Middle East. The latter was the most bitter because of a series of bombings that had killed Americans and destroyed the CIA station in Beirut. Artfully, Casey used one of these secret wars to cover up another, Iran-Contra, and Bradley's team were the main targets of this successful deception.

On 8 March 1985, a car bomb in Beirut exploded killing eighty people and wounding a further two hundred and fifty-six. The target, the Shiite religious leader Mohammed Hussein

Fadlallah, whose house was forty yards away, remained unhurt. Woodward already knew that Reagan had authorised the creation of teams to conduct pre-emptive strikes against terrorists planning to attack US facilities in the Middle East. This was true, but in fact the CIA teams had been stood down after agonised discussions about how far they should go. Woodward was told by a senior Lebanese intelligence official that his own service had carried out the bombing, but that the CIA knew about it in advance and had also provided the technical training. McMahon, the CIA Deputy Director, confirmed that they had set up the Lebanese bombing teams, but they had pulled back. In the end, the *Post* claimed that the Lebanese intelligence service had in turn hired others to do the bombing and it was a 'runaway' mission not authorised by CIA. Nevertheless, on 15 March, Casey called Woodward and insisted he could end up with 'blood on his hands' because of the way the story was picked up in the region, provoking retaliation against Americans (Doc.25/1986).

Intriguingly, Woodward's sources told him that the word "assassinate" was in the original CIA plan, which he thought in violation of the law (Doc.26/1985) presumably because of Ford's executive order against assassination. The impending story about the Beirut bombing clearly caused the CIA press officer George Lauder considerable agony. He had no less than three separate phone calls with Bradlee over 11 and 12 May 1985. In the last conversation, Lauder been out mowing his lawn and 'thinking' before clarifying the issue of Congressional notification for Bradlee. Lauder was clearly very unhappy about the revelations - but finally conceded that 'you have the facts' (Doc.27/1985).

Pelton and 'Prosecution'

Bradlee's relationship with national security was increasingly abrasive. He felt the rules were applied unfairly and was now on a mission to prove that Washington leaked mostly from the top. Some intelligence revelations were even made by senior figures in a fit of absent of mind. Typically, in the summer of 1986, Richard Perle, Assistant Secretary of State for Defence, offered a remarkably public set of comments on signals intelligence and Russian missile tests, revealing that the 'Russians don't necessarily encrypt the same thing on every flight'. He added that this might be a 'mistake' on their part and 'sometimes we get lucky' (Moir 1986). Bradlee wrote to Bill Odom, Director of the NSA, asking if this was not a breach of 18 USC 789 and also asked for the opinion of the NSA's legal counsel (Doc.28/1986). Again, it was unlikely that Richard Perle was going to be led away and placed in a dungeon, but it left security officials on notice that the press was watching for the partisan application of secrecy legislation.

This skirmish was part of a bigger battle. On 29 May 1986, the *Post* published a controversial story. This concerned Ronald Pelton, a lowly former analyst of the NSA who was now detained on espionage charges. Spying for the Russians between 1980 and 1983, he gave away some of the best secrets of American intelligence collection against Moscow. This included an operation called "Ivy Bells", whereby the United States tapped undersea cables carrying messages from the Soviet high command. Placing a pod next to the cable under the sea, communications were siphoned off without physically damaging the cable. Periodically specialist submarines and divers in space-age deep-sea diving suits would replace the pods and send the recordings back to NSA.

In 1985, Pelton's treachery was revealed to the Americans by a KGB defector called Vitaly Yurchenko. Pelton had been identified, arrested and placed on trial. Bill Odom, the prickly director of the NSA, was adamant that he did not want the secret of "Ivy Bells" published in the press. This request involved the *Post* in endless negotiations with Casey, Odom at NSA, the National Security Council chief John Poindexter and even Reagan himself. Kay Graham, still the newspaper's owner, was called out of the shower to speak to Ronald Reagan on the phone about Pelton, 'scribbling page after page of wet notes of her conversation'. Bradlee recalled that the negotiations were so protracted that he felt 'more like a lawyer than an editor' as he tried to get the story into the paper. Bradlee now took the law very seriously, but by the end of this episode he was exhausted (Bradlee 1996, 270-2).

Bradlee was mystified by the fuss. The obvious question was, given that Pelton had already given this secret to the Russians five years earlier, what was the NSA trying to hide? Was the NSA simply trying to cover up the embarrassment of the security breach by keeping what the Russians already knew from the American people? Bradlee was even more perplexed when his investigative team found three references to the operations in print that had appeared in American newspapers ten years before. 'Ivy Bells' was one of the stories that journalists had sieved out of leaks from the season of intelligence inquiries in the mid-1970s and Seymour Hersh had even written a story about it. Incredibly, when he took this with up with Odom, the Director of NSA replied in a crestfallen tone, 'I had hoped you wouldn't find that'. To Bradlee it now seemed like a ridiculous parlour game (Bradlee 1996, 471-2).

Yet Casey now threatened prosecution. In May 1986, Bradlee and his managing editor, Len Downie, met with Casey at the University Club in downtown Washington. Reviewing the latest version of the story that the *Post* wanted to run, Casey took a sip of scotch and revealed that he had just come from the Justice Department. He insisted that story still 'endangered the national security' and so threatened prosecution if the *Post* went ahead. It is likely that Casey was actually more vexed with the *Post* about stories on other issues, including the Lebanon. But signals intelligence was more tightly protected under a law passed in the 1950s, and so Casey felt he could exert more pressure here.

On 21 May 1986, Bradlee ran the story. The next day Pelton's trial began. Bradlee had become increasingly cynical, claiming that what he had learned was that the government would try to prevent publications 'simply to avoid national embarrassment' adding that given the Russian knew everything about Ivy Bells there was 'no issue of national security'. He was adamant that patriotism was not the exclusive province of public officials and felt that rolling out the President to oppress the *Post* over a non-secret was an abuse. He recalled that Nixon had insisted that Watergate should not be investigated because of 'national security' (Bradlee 1996, 474).

But Bradlee was hiding something. Odom had in fact explained what the real problem was. Certainly, the Russians knew about Ivy Bells, but other countries did not, and now the Americans were using the same techniques against them. These other countries included China, Vietnam and North Korea. Indeed, the US Navy was developing an entire new fleet of spy subs to support these expanded operations. Incredibly, although the pioneering work in this area had been reported by Seymour Hersh on the front page of America's newspapers as early as 1976, some countries were just not reading the American press. Odom did not think that the NSA

would be so lucky a second time. It is not clear what the impact of the 1986 Pelton story was on these other operations (Doc.29/1985).

Later in the year the mood turned darker. Just before 6pm on an autumn evening, William Webster, FBI Director, arrived in a limousine outside the offices of the *Post*, dressed in a tuxedo. Bradlee joined him on the back seat. Webster explained that he had information that Dusko Doder, the *Post's* Moscow much-respected bureau chief had accepted \$1,000 from the KGB. The allegation had been made by the same high-ranking Soviet defector, Yurchenko, who had uncovered Pelton. An FBI investigation eventually found no evidence that Doder was working with the Soviet intelligence service. Three months after his highly publicized defection, Yurchenko suddenly eluded his CIA handlers and returned to Moscow, prompting some CIA officials to conclude that he had possibly been a double agent. The case is still debated, but he was decorated on his return to Moscow (Riebling 361).

In fairness to Webster, he conceded that they had been over every line of Doder's despatches and could find no evidence of espionage. Moreover, he admitted that Yurchenko did not even have first-hand evidence of the payment 'he had simply heard tell of the payment'. In fact, unbeknown to Bradlee, the FBI later arranged an elaborate sting, furnishing Doder with classified information to see if he would pass it to the Soviets - but he did not. But what was worrying Webster was that Doder was about to return from Moscow and was due to be assigned to the *Post's* intelligence beat, ensuring daily contact with the intelligence community in Washington (Bradlee 1996, 476).

What was Doder's response? He thought that this was just sour grapes at the CIA because his reporting had repeatedly scooped them. Typically, he deduced that Andropov had died in 1984 before anyone else. In late 1992, the story leaked out and *Time Magazine* published an article suggesting that Doder had been co-opted by the K.G.B. when he was Moscow bureau chief for the *Post* from 1981 to 1985. Doder successfully sued for libel and four year later was paid \$262,000 in damages plus costs (Lyll 1996, Kurtz 1992). Many at the *Post* were still wondering who had been driving this story and whether it was not just another general attempt to beat up on the newspaper as the panic of Iran-Contra began to overtake officials Washington. Len Downie, executive editor of the *Post*, stated publicly 'I'm quite sure it's a vendetta'(Andrew 1992).

Conclusion

Like the *New York Times*, the *Post* was probably closest to the CIA in the 1950s. Bradlee recalls that Phil Graham, the owner at the time, 'knew all of the old boy network that ran the agency – Desmond Fitzgerald, Frank Wisner, Tracy Barnes et al' (Bradlee 1996, 250). This era faded with the early deaths of Phil Graham and Frank Wisner respectively in 1963 and 1965. Nevertheless, Bradlee remained close to a number of CIA officers, not least because of family connections, an extension of the Georgetown Set whose earlier incarnation has been chronicled by Herken (2015).

Bradlee's own period at the *Post*, which began in 1965, was a journey of disillusionment, punctuated by lessons in the growing importance of the law. In 1971, the

Supreme Court ruling on the Pentagon Papers had inclined him to take a favourable view of judges. Thereafter, his public position was that he did not like law-breakers. This was a good piece of moral high ground to defend in his carefully constructed replies to his readers. But he also believed it, and this is why he rated Iran-Contra as a more serious scandal than Watergate, since at the very centre of the scheme was an effort to subvert the Boland Amendment, an important piece of legislation by Congress.

But he was also a pragmatist. Bradlee, like so many DCIs, including Casey, saw journalists and intelligence officers as simply seekers after truth. 'CIA station chiefs abroad – especially in Vietnam and the Middle East – could be enormously useful when both parties to the discussions were realistic about each other's loyalties. As long as everyone was looking for the truth, everything was fine'. But, he argued, the problems began when this crossed the line into covert actions, propaganda, or message shaping. He continued: 'as soon as the spooks tried to make things happen, or share foreign correspondents, the waters muddied'. He observed that the best journalists all had to decide 'whether they were being manipulated' (Bradlee, 1996 454). His concern about this continued to grow and in 1996, in public address he observed: 'Some journalists - especially the conspiratorial types - find a natural affinity with spooks. Spies can pass on rumours that can be dressed up and turned into page one stories – if you are not worried by disinformation' (Doc.30/1996).

Bradlee was undoubtedly a patriot. The letters from readers that needled him most were those that suggested otherwise. Even during the 1980s, a period of vexed relations with the CIA, with there were still moments of co-operation. At one point, Bradlee and his colleague Howard Simons, 'came into possession' of a manuscript in Russian 'filled with complex mathematical computations and diagrams'. They got in touch with the Deputy Director of the CIA and showed it to him. It proved to be nothing less than the latest plans for a Soviet Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile fired from submarines. Years later, one of the CIA weapons experts stated that this material was 'unique' and 'valuable' giving the United States 'the best insight we had' on Soviet Strategic Sea Force Launched Ballistic Missiles, including their engineering and their propellants. Not only had he handed over an IRBM manual, he had also turned in a potential sigint traitor complete with an East German girlfriend. Bradlee liked to remind DCIs, that in a past life, both he and Woodward had been naval officers with Top Secret clearances (Bradlee 1996, 455. 480).

Overall, what we see here is the evolution of Bradlee's thinking about the appropriate relationship between intelligence and the press. In terms of his ideological tenets, and specifically Bradlee's patriotism, he saw the media as very much the Fourth Estate and an integral part of not only intelligence oversight but also of the American constitution. Bradlee's thinking about secrecy and the press was therefore more ambitious than his contemporaries, many of whom were located in New York, not Washington. His rivals lacked the nuanced insights of the elite cocktail circuit. Moving beyond the issue of mere boundaries and balances between liberty and security, Bradlee saw the press as a regulator in itself, perhaps even a component of government - especially after the Iran-Contra. The irony was that this holistic view drew on his experience of the Georgetown Set, a social construct that was already in gradual decay.

By the 1980s, Bradlee understood that a growing part of his editorial role was negotiator, sometimes with the White House. Because Americans lacked any kind of formal

system for mediating between the public right to know and national security secrecy, the bargaining was constant, while Odom and Casey introduced a new climate of menace. Bradlee hoped his moments of sincere co-operation would be remembered and favours like the IRBM missile-manual triumph returned. Bradlee expected to collect 'Brownie points' for this - the intelligence community equivalent of air miles - to counteract the constant charge from 'morons' that the press in general and the *Post* in particular would disregard national security in favour of a scoop. But he eventually realised that this was futile – all the credit that they had built up with intelligence community was, he lamented, 'worth exactly one ride on the subway' (Bradlee 1996, 455, 485).

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