

# RESTRAINING THE MEDIA AT THE CIA

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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[William M. Baker] said two middle-level editors argued with him that there had been reports of the CIA buying up large amounts of property in suburban Virginia, and that the public should know, if those reports were true, where the CIA's installations were and what sort of neighbor the CIA was.

After making that threat, Baker said he met with Leonard Downie, managing editor for the Post, who agreed to make an "accommodation" with the CIA. The Post would publish its article about what sort of neighbor the CIA was, but would refrain from disclosing the location of any secret CIA building. The story ran last October.

## FULL TEXT

WASHINGTON - A former public information officer for William H. Webster, the head of the CIA, told a Harvard University audience last month that improved relations between the press and the CIA had helped him to persuade three major newspapers or their reporters to kill, alter or delay articles concerning CIA operations.

Although the news organizations challenge some details, the speech by the former official, William M. Baker, outlines the relations between the press and the CIA under Webster. The picture contrasts sharply with the relationship under Webster's predecessor, the late William J. Casey.

Unlike Casey, Webster has not threatened news organizations publicly with prosecutions of them and their reporters if they publish articles about secret operations. And the concern among journalists that CIA officials lie to them has also diminished.

"In general, the willingness of the CIA to open its doors to reporters has improved greatly. The difference between Webster and Casey is enormous," said John Walcott, a veteran national security reporter who is now with US News & World Report.

However, the situations described by Baker have raised speculation that similar stories might have been printed during Casey's tenure. They also have shed light on the murky ground rules that apply in dealings between journalists and CIA officials when news reporting intersects with intelligence gathering.

In an interview Friday, Baker, who recently was promoted to assistant director of the criminal investigative division at the FBI, acknowledged that his success with reporters while at the CIA had more to do with the way he treated them than with the information he provided them.

If a reporter presented Baker with information that was incorrect, he said he would warn that the article would be false. But if it were true, Baker said, he would refuse comment or try to sanitize the story of sensitive information such as the identity or location of a source of intelligence.

"I dealt with them as professionals," Baker said. "I never cried wolf unless it was for real. I operated under the assumption that if I lied once, then my credibility was gone."

In contrast with the experiences of his predecessors, Baker said, a journalist never published an article that

disclosed a national security operation after he had warned them about the story. Reporting on national security or intelligence activities is one of journalism's most difficult assignments. Most intelligence officers are dubious about a public right to know about secret operations, even if they took place years ago, turned out to be of little consequence or involved improper behavior.

And reporters face the possibility of being told after researching a story that its publication would disclose a current operation that could endanger lives or the collection of vital intelligence.

In his speech on July 27 at Harvard, Baker described experiences with The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times and The Washington Post.

WALL STREET JOURNAL: Baker said a Journal reporter approached him more than two years ago to discuss a sensitive issue.

"He laid out to me the complete scenario of a Middle East terrorist group and their worldwide infrastructure, and how they could carry out certain acts if commanded to do so. Some of that information he had was based upon sensitive intercepts and some of it pertained to sensitive sources and methods," Baker said.

Baker said Friday that he had not needed to inform the Journal reporter that US law prohibits printing of information from such intercepts. "I explained to him the damage that could be done to an ongoing intelligence operation involving the CIA and the FBI, and I asked him if he would hold his story," Baker said. The reporter agreed to abide by his request.

"On a handshake, he agreed to keep the story secret," Baker said in his address. "That meeting took place over two years ago, and to this date, the reporter has been true to his word."

Thomas Petzinger Jr., deputy Washington bureau chief, said he was unfamiliar with the situation described by Baker. However, he said, The Journal would frown on any of its reporters agreeing not to pursue an important story without discussing the issue first with their editors.

NEW YORK TIMES: As an illustration of how he was able to delay a story, Baker told of his experiences with a Times reporter who approached him last year with information about a spy investigation. The reporter told him that he was aware that a retired US Army officer had been selling information to a Soviet-bloc intelligence service and asked Baker to confirm the investigation.

In addition, the reporter said he had learned that the spy had been able to "scam" the CIA by getting it to pay him for information he promised to deliver, but never did.

On checking with CIA's counterintelligence branch, Baker said he was astonished to learn not only that the investigation was ongoing, but also that the suspected spy was still under surveillance because evidence for prosecution was insufficient.

To maintain the investigation's secrecy, Baker asked the reporter to withhold publication, and in return offered to give the reporter the entire story once an arrest was made. "Obviously, this assurance of a scoop was a critical factor in his -- and his editors' -- response," Baker said in explaining why the Times decided to hold the story.

About a year ago, when the story broke with the arrest in West Germany of retired Army Sgt. Clyde Lee Conrad, Baker said he informed the Times reporter, who was able to produce "a lengthy account of the espionage ring and the arrests."

The reporter waited until March, however, to publish the account of Conrad's tricking of the CIA to pay him \$50,000 for useless information.

Jeff Gerth, the Times' investigative and national security reporter who wrote the stories, was on vacation last week and could not be reached for comment. Philip Taubman, The Times' deputy Washington bureau chief, said he was unaware of the details of the case, but voiced doubt that Gerth or his editors would have withheld publication in return for a scoop.

Instead, Taubman said, journalists make their decisions based on whether they believe they are being told the truth when told publication would impair national security.

"Ultimately editors make decisions on the best information they have, but in the intelligence area no one can ever know if they are getting the full story or just being blown smoke," Taubman said.

WASHINGTON POST: Baker said that in order to alter a story, he had to threaten to testify against The Post if its planned disclosure of secret CIA installations in suburban Virginia resulted in an act of violence at one of the buildings.

Baker said one of the Post's more energetic reporters was given the assignment of finding what buildings the CIA owned beyond the three it acknowledges. After some digging, the reporter approached Baker with a list that Baker found alarming.

Baker said two middle-level editors argued with him that there had been reports of the CIA buying up large amounts of property in suburban Virginia, and that the public should know, if those reports were true, where the CIA's installations were and what sort of neighbor the CIA was.

Baker disagreed with publishing the full list, saying that some of the facilities were unprotected and that making their locations known could result in a deranged individual shooting up a building.

"Let me give you something to take back to your lawyers," Baker recalled telling The Post's middle-level editors. If anyone is injured from an act of violence in those buildings, "I am going to be among the first to testify . . . that I requested you not to go with this information which we considered classified."

After making that threat, Baker said he met with Leonard Downie, managing editor for the Post, who agreed to make an "accommodation" with the CIA. The Post would publish its article about what sort of neighbor the CIA was, but would refrain from disclosing the location of any secret CIA building. The story ran last October.

Downie denied that he or the Post gave in to Baker's threats. He said the reporter was never assigned the story of locating secret CIA installations, and that the Post would never publish such a list.

"We are not in the business of giving addresses of CIA safe houses and the like," Downie said. "We went after a story about what kind of neighbor the CIA was in the Reston area and that's the story we published."

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