

September 16, 1978

Gentlemen,

I presume my article on the Hmong refugees will appear tomorrow, but in any case I have found its history in the hands of the Washington Post very interesting as a minor commentary on the state of the art of journalism in AD 1978, USA. I would like to pass along my observations for whatever truth or entertainment value they may be found to contain.

Item 1: Telephone call from Mr. Epstein with message (I quote) "Al Horn, our editor, thinks we will have to do this one."

Item 2: First meeting with Horn. "Why did you write this story?" Answer: I was bored and wanted something to do. It started as an idea to do a general piece on all SE Asia refugees, but when I got to Bangkok the Hmong seemed the least covered story. Horn "But you went out all that way?" Answer: "I was also meeting a friend in Hong Kong. She works in Peking now, and I actually went up there after Thailand for three weeks."

Please note that up to this point, and indeed to this day, there has been virtually no discussion of the content of my article. Very little attention has been paid to the truth, balance or newsworthiness of what was said in the article. * The whole thrust of the Post's editorial ^{concern} or perhaps I should say the principal thrust has been who is the author. What is his angle? Does he have a hidden agenda? (I wonder, here, whether the same thrust would have obtained in, say, 1935, 1945, 1955? I suspect the answer says a lot about the state of our mentality and the level of debate today, and a sad message it is.)

First concern: Does the author still work for the US Government? Answer: No, he retired in 1974 and has spent much of the last four years in the back country of Alaska.

Second concern: Did the author ever work for CIA? Answer: Yes, prior to joining AID in 1962.

First meeting with Rosenfeld: Still no discussion of the content of the article. Are the Hmong in fact being exterminated by the Vietnamese and Pathet Lao? What is actually the situation of the refugees in Thailand? Does the US have any obligation to these people? All good questions which editors should be concerned with. Instead, thrust of meeting is, we must cover our rear, and second, maybe the author has a hidden agenda, even now.

Comment: If the article had been about gardening, the raising of better petunias, there would have been no editorial anxiety about the author. ~~xxxxxxx~~ It was in fact the theme of the story itself that was somehow potentially subversive or threatening or controversial, which alone made the identity of the author so vital. If the author in this case had a hidden agenda, it would have to be reflected in the article or else that agenda would not be served. So what, on analysis, could the hidden agenda be? This, I suggest,

(* At least, in talks with me.)

was the underlying concern, or one of them, of your staff. There could not be a hidden agenda to make CIA look good, since the article points out that the Hmong were led down a disastrous garden path by the CIA and the article did not even attempt to exonerate the CIA by pointing out that it was carrying out the orders of the President with, in those days, the tacit approval of substantially everyone, which would have ~~been~~ been fairer to the CIA.) There must be some other hidden agenda, but what ?

It could be that the article was subsidized by the Hmong Refugee Association of America to promote the entry of Hmong into the US - except that the poor bastards in the camps have no such spokesman. But that couldn't be the hidden agenda in any case, because who really cares about Hmong in this town anyway ?

No, if the article is controversial, subversive and a hot potato - and it is - there must be some other explanation. What could it be ?

Gentlemen, permit me to supply what I suggest may be the answer. In the 1960s a great many people committed themselves to the proposition, and involved their egos and their value systems in the commitment, that the victory of "socialism" in Southeast Asia was not only right but represented the best interest of the peoples there, that it would bring liberation, stability, peace, etc to the region. The actual feelings of people in Southeast Asia were seldom objectively surveyed. In any case, the socialist victory occurred, the forces of right and truth triumphed - but what happened ? We find hundreds of thousands of liberated people risking their lives to get out of the new Southeast Asia. Hundreds of thousands end up in reeducation centers which vary from lecture halls to pure extermination camps. Occasionally someone suggests, sotto voce, that there might be a human rights problem here. Finally it gets so bad that George McGovern - after three years - condemns the new rulers of Cambodia. Perhaps, just perhaps, the time has come when an obscure writer, albeit tainted by association with the forces of reaction in the 1950s, can suggest in a small, ~~but~~ garbled voice, that maybe a little hill tribe has been taking an enormous screwing, and that ~~he~~ they have been shafted not only by their enemies but also by their friends. This puts the Washington Post in a dilemma: To be sure, TIME (in the Asia edition only), the Washington Star and a few others have printed stories about the extermination of the Hmong, so it may be respectable to print some mention of it. At least there is some protection against any charge that the Post has gotten soft on anti-communism. And it is newsworthy. So maybe the Post "has" to print it, but it makes us very vulnerable. The article will, indeed, be somewhat subversive to the ~~international~~ conventional wisdom of our peer group and could subject us to criticism. We must make it quite clear that we are aware of the tainted past of the author, although it is somewhat difficult to tie that up with the plight of the Hmong, particularly since he says he never met a Hmong before this spring. But then, of course, we don't have to believe him. Perhaps we should add a footnote "The views expressed in this article are those of the suspect author, and do not necessarily, indeed (!), reflect those of the editors or the staff of the Washington Post. We are only publishing this piece because we say, in the tradition of Voltaire, we do not agree with the implications of your article, but we are a great newspaper which can tolerate the expression of opinions however contrary to the convictions of all right-thinking people."

* See Henry S. Bradsher, Washington Star, March 14, 1978

My literary efforts do tend to get a bit too long, dont they ? Anyway I hope I have helped you to analyze what troubles you. Of course I am not surprised. Actually I wrote the original piece with the Readers Digest in mind. (They pay better than the Washington Post, perhaps the understatement of the year.) They told me at the outset that they had already contracted for an article on Vietnamese "boat people" and wouldn't probably be able to take mine. Such was indeed the case, but Bill Schulz, the Washington bureau chief, was kind and candid enough to advise me that I would have great difficulty in placing this story because editors and readers would not want to be reminded of the Indochina war. He did not explicitly state, but I got the message, that the implications of the story were inconvenient.

in the article,
You will note that I simply state the facts, all of which I went to great pains to substantiate. (I am still not satisfied, because I just learned that Dr. Domenica Garcia's name should be spelled Dominica. I guess it's not vital, and I dont want to bug Al Horn still again with a phone call. But I do worry about the truth of what appears under my name.) I indulged in no condemnation of Hanoi or anyone else. I suggest it is precisely the facts in the article that make it "subversive", the more factual the more subversive. I also suggest that Al Horn's telephone conversation of yesterday, in which he said that the simple formula agreed on the day before, that it would be noted that I was a CIA officer in the 1950, was insufficient because it did not go far enough. I suspect that what Al really wanted to convey to the reader (i.e. his own peer group) was that I was a very tainted source, so "please do not blame me for printing his article, the facts expressed in which may offend all right-thinking, sophisticated editors, including, of course, - if necessary - me."

Some "taint," some relevance !

Gentlemen, I fear we all live in parlous times.

One last item: If and when the Washington Post opens its collective wallet, lets the moths fly out, and pays me for the article, if printed, I would ask you to send ~~it~~ the check, on my behalf, to:

Mr. Leo Cherne
International Rescue Committee
589 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y.

Send me an info copy for my files. I must also fight for my bona fides with the Internal Revenue Service when I deduct the cost of my ~~art~~ air fare to Bangkok and back as a business expense in connection with the writing of the article.

With best wishes,
Shulz
Ogden Williams