All parties damaged in CIA-Safran affair

Agency, professor and Harvard hurt by publicity, as is the image of universities in eyes of the public

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Special to the Globe

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The Great Intelligence Wars that filled headlines last year with tales of spies, double agents, defectors and re-defectors received a small Cambridge footnote in mid-October, with the news that professor Nadav Safran, the director of Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, had secretly received some $150,000 from the Central Intelligence Agency to pay for a conference of Islamic fundamentalism and to finish a book on Saudi Arabia.

The minor academic rumpus this triggered is obviously not comparable to a big-league intelligence scandal. However, last week. A. Michael Spence, dean of the Harvard faculty of arts and sciences, issued a report that said Safran erred by not initially disclosing that he had received CIA funding for his conference: that Safran was resigning as the Middle Eastern center director, effective in June; and that he apologized for Harvard's error in not taking action when Safran reported his CIA contract for the book.

The fallout from ail this has been remarkable: When Harvard stumbles, the world takes notice. Reports have appeared in the American and British press, in Israel's authoritative Har'etz, in a Kuwaiti paper and even in the British Broadcasting Corporation's overseas service.

Harvard embarrassed

The controversy has embarrassed Harvard, brought critical letters from outraged alumni and stained the Harvard University Press, which published Sa-Iran's book and which now stands as the first university press to be publicly linked to the CIA.

That's not all. The furor has badly hurt Safran's reputation for disinterested scholarship and that of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, as well. It split the center into a small, pro-Safran faction and a larger group of angry opponents: triggered concern on all sides regarding the reception the center's faculty and students may receive in the Middle East: raised fears lest outside financing of the center may dry up: and undermined the center's discreet efforts, over the years, at bridge-building to Middle Eastern moderates, some of whom now fear the dangers of being tarred with the CIA brush.

The furor has provided new ammunition for anti-Americanism among Middle' Eastern intellectuals, while reinforcing the widespread assumption that foreign scholars aren't always what they seem to be. Americans, with our stereotype of the dotty prolessor, may find this laughable, but it isn't: Much evidence goes the other way.

The most famous intelligence officer of all time — T. E. Lawrence — learned how to> blend into the Arab landscape while on archeological digs in Syria as an Oxford student. Documents in London's Public Records Office reveal that Ann Lambton, a highly-regarded British scholar of modern Iran, played a small but helpful part in British plans to smash — by arms, if necessary — the Mossadegh government during 1951. and the late Robert Zaehner (subsequently the Spaulding Professor of Eastern

Religions and Ethics) actually took leave from Oxford to serve as MI6 (the British CIA) station chief in Tehran during 1951–52.

Closer to home, we find that Donald Wilber, whose standard textbook. "Iran: Past and Present." has gone through nine editions with the Princeton University Press, has openly spoken of his long rob as CIA consultant, particularly during the 1953 CIA coup against Mossadegh And Richard Cottam, a political scientist at the University of Pittsburgh, has said he served as a CIA specialist on Iran during 1953–58, before turning against the agency's manipulations.

CIA also a loser

The scholar, writer, or free-lance Journalist. whose profession provides both expertise and cover at very low cost, is good intelligence catch — or teas, uni: Third World governments caught on Americans may be blind to this: Middle Easterners are not.

The CIA also emerges badly from the Safran affair. Ignore tor a moment the moral aspects of secret contracts and rule-breaking. Simply consider the competence — or lack of it — of the Contracts Office in the Directorate of Intelligence, which probably drafted the stipulation that Safran's research be kept secret. Here is the typical failing of intelligence middle managers in ail governments, basing actions on assumptions that a child could demolish. True with the Bay of Pigs; true with the Phoenix pregram in Vietnam; true now with this minor academic rumpus. So elaborate a research project as Safran's book, involving various graduate students and secretaries over the years, would certainly precipitate trouble in so chatty and open, yet so intense and Ideologically divided a place as the Center for Middle Eastern Studies. Only in the closed, inward-facing Intelligence subculture, where mental lockstep and lack of imagination mesh with security considerations to exclude outsiders with inconvenient questions, could so obvious a danger be overlooked.

Had the CIA managers even understood the agency's own history, particularly the outcry in 1967 over its long and secret subsidizing of the National Student Association, they would have known better. The hard-nosed CIA professionals, for whom secrets really matter, had never liked this arrangement. Student leaders, they contended, are talkative, unschooled in secrecy, vulnerable to pangs of conscience: suppose one goes public? And one did: "Ramparts" ran the story: the country was shocked; and a network of CIA fronts and fake foundations was swept away. Either this lesson was forgotten or creating a link to Harvard's Center was seen as worth lite risk.

Here lies the heart of the matter. For the CIA began striving, under Stansfield Turner in 1977–80, to rebuild the university connections that had been damaged in the mid-1970s. A Harvard beachhead would certainly help, impressing academicians elsewhere and providing access to Middle East students and visitors, as well as potential graduate student recruits for the Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis in the Directorate of Intelligence. Such connections matter to the agency, whose morale

The fallout from revelations about the relationship between Harvard professor Nadav Safran, above, and the CIA has been remarkable When Harvard stumbles, the world takes notice.

suffered badly from the criticism Congress and the media dished out in the mid-1970s. Now; sniped at by the far right for being insufficiently anticommunist, and always fearful of what the pendulum swings of American politics may bring, the agency may well be cultivating any influential academic friends it can find.

Ironically enough, congressional attempts to liberalize the CIA are particularly to blame. Angered by the Iranian intelligence "failure" of 1978–79, and oblivious to the inherent unpredictablility of great events. Congress and the media blast the handful of government experts on Iran for being inbred and myopic. Had they systematically consulted the academicians? If not, why not?

If only to cover its flanks against such congressional criticism, the intelligence community is now open and responsive on the Middle East.

Safran's book was lavishly funded. He began in 1979–80 with a $25,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, whose official in charge is now angered at being linked to a CIA-funded book. Safran got $107,000 more from the CIA in 1982–83, with $46,000 io him personally, and $20,000 apiece — nearly an assistant professor's pay — for two research assistants.

No doubt Safran's remuneration from this Is paltry when compared to the big bucks that professors in science, business or economics may make on the side. But this hardly fits the idealistic picture that many Americans still have of their universities. Harvard above all, as representing something better than individual entrepreneurship, of cash on the barrel-head for knowledge sold.

In our secular age. the great universities have largely succeeded the churches in popular esteem; hence their tax-free status. Should we instead regard them as ivy-covered industrial parks, with professors and graduate students eager for their share?

The unimpeded search for truth is central for scholarship and the universities that sustain it. Secret contracts and funding, the right to censor, a conference called under obscure pretenses — all distort that search, undercutting the moral foundations of the university and deceiving those who believe in its Ideals.

Leonard Bushkoff writes frequently for Focus.

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Boston Globe.
<cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP89G00720R000600620012-4.pdf>