

The strange but true tale of J. Edgar Hoover's 24-year obsession with veteran reporter and left-wing gadfly George Seldes, the godfather of press criticism. By Jim Edwards

# The Journalist and the G-Man



The January 13, 1941, issue of *In Fact*, in which Seldes broke the news that tobacco is deadly ("Tobacco Shortens Life"), a story the commercial press ignored for years

ONE MORNING in 1925, a 35-year-old American reporter named George Seldes nervously boarded the Orient Express in Rome. A correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*, Seldes had gotten word before dawn that Benito Mussolini had run out of patience with him. Unlike most of the American press corps in Rome, Seldes was given to naming the Italian dictator's assassins in his dispatches. Fearing for his life, Seldes packed his bags and set off for Paris.

Just as the train approached the French border, it made an unscheduled stop. Italian soldiers boarded and began making their way through the cars, yelling, "Where is Seldes?" The reporter realized that he, like others who had spoken out against Il Duce, was not going to be allowed to leave the country alive. So he barged into a compartment occupied by four British Royal Navy admirals. His introduction: "Gentlemen, if I wasn't about to be killed here on this train, I wouldn't break in on you." If the admirals hadn't pretended that Seldes was one of their party, Mussolini's henchmen might have robbed the world of one of the finest and most influential journalists of the past century. And now, through a Freedom of Information Act request, *Brill's Content* has acquired a stunning cache of FBI files that document Seldes's strange relationship with another nemesis, J. Edgar Hoover, who waged a virulent and often bizarre 24-year campaign to put Seldes out of business—for good.

Chances are you've never heard of George Seldes, who died in 1995 at the age of 104. His name never quite made it into the history textbooks along with such fellow muckrakers as Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell. But Seldes's 42-year career as a reporter and editor, spanning the first half of the 20th century,

changed the face of journalism. As legendary reporter I.F. Stone once put it, Seldes was "the dean and the 'grand-daddy' of us investigative reporters."

George Seldes was the first to report, in 1941, that cigarettes can kill you. It was he who exposed religious broadcaster Father Coughlin as a Nazi. Before any of his competitors, he traced how lobbying groups such as the National Association of Manufacturers manipulate Congress. He was the author of 21 books, including 1935's *Sawdust Caesar*, one of the first biographies of Mussolini. And, most important, Seldes was the first reporter to systematically target his own colleagues: In 1940, he cofounded *In Fact*, a bimonthly newsletter (it would later become a weekly) devoted to the premise that, as Seldes once put it, "the most sacred cow of the press is the press itself." *In Fact* essentially invented the genre of press criticism. Seldes threw open the doors of the newsroom for

the world to see, an act that has resonated through our culture from *The New Yorker's* A.J. Liebling (whose heyday at the magazine began in the late 1940s) to *Network* screenwriter Paddy Chayefsky, from *Inside.com* cofounder Kurt Andersen to *The Insider* director Michael Mann.

"George Seldes was like the trombone of muckraking journalism," *Village Voice* columnist Nat Hentoff told filmmaker Rick Goldsmith in his 1996 Academy Award-nominated documentary, *Tell the Truth and Run: George Seldes and the American Press*, which paid tribute to Seldes for the legacy of *In Fact*. "His voice was so clear, so loud, and so strident, if you like. He took what should be the most honorable term in American journalism—muckraking—and made it work again." Goldsmith's documentary, which featured lengthy interviews with Seldes, including his account of fleeing Italy, was critically acclaimed but has been shown in few theaters.

Just as remarkable as Seldes's contribution to journalism, perhaps, is the extraordinary cast of characters that passed through his life.



FBI director J. Edgar Hoover (below right) was convinced that George Seldes (bottom left), editor of the groundbreaking journal of press criticism *In Fact*, was a communist. Hoover and his agents hunted Seldes for a quarter-century in a fruitless bid to prove it. Pictured are pages from a 1941 letter Hoover wrote to Seldes attacking an *In Fact* story.

Mr. George Seldes

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May I also make the observation that in the future should you desire to correctly report the activities of the FBI, I shall be very glad indeed to hear from you on specific matters in order that specific activities of the FBI in question may be explained to you if consistent with the public interest, because naturally it would not be possible to give out information of a confidential nature obtained in connection with pending investigations. I have taken you at your word, and as I said, shall observe with interest the action you take.

Very truly yours,

*J. Edgar Hoover*  
John Edgar Hoover  
Director

Enclosure



Federal Bureau of Investigation  
United States Department of Justice  
Washington, D. C.

August 27, 1941

Mr. George Seldes  
Editor  
"In Fact"  
19 University Place  
New York, New York

Dear Mr. Seldes:

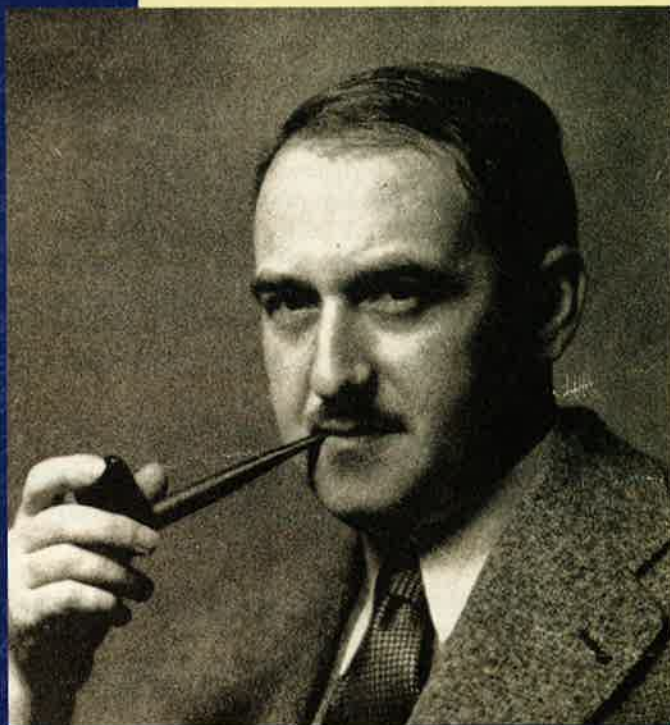
I wish to acknowledge your letter of July 21, wherein you refer to a letter which I directed to Mr. Thomas A. Murphy. I did state in my letter to Mr. Murphy in response to his request that the May 12, 1941, issue of "In Fact" contained a collection of "lies and falsehoods." I made this statement since I had no other choice in view of the obvious inaccuracies of the statements appearing in "In Fact."

You state that it is your purpose to publish the facts, that you keep your columns open to correction, and that if I will point out "one statement or one word in 'In Fact' which is not true,....." you will print a correction. I am not so much interested in a correction as I am in keeping the records straight, and accordingly I wish to advise as follows with reference to the statements appearing in the May 12 issue of "In Fact":

"In Fact" says, "Bridges case seen as opening FBI gun against labor and civil liberties in preparation for war."

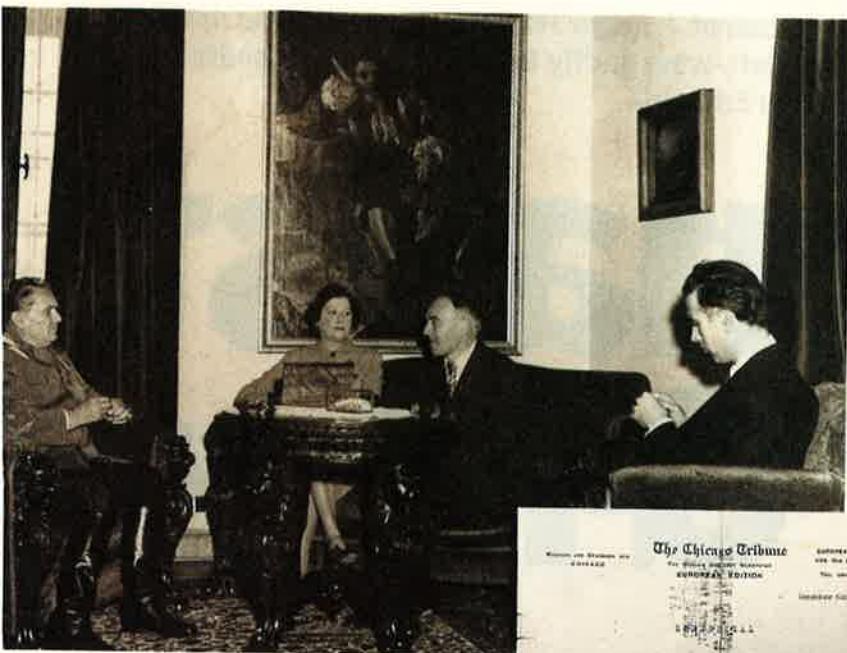
This statement is incorrect inasmuch as the FBI is a law-enforcing organization which has for its objective the preservation and protection of civil liberties. It does not inject itself into the employer-employee relationship. The FBI is charged, however, with carrying out the will of Congress and the instructions of the Attorney General of the United States and the President of the United States. The investigation of Harry Bridges, which resulted in a recent hearing afforded Mr. Bridges, was made on the specific instructions of the Attorney General.

"In Fact" states, "That in preparation for entering the war the majority of American citizens who want peace are being intimidated and harassed by J. Edgar Hoover, who did the same job for Atty Gen'l Palmer in World War I."





**"[Seldes's] voice was so clear," journalist Nat Hentoff said. "He took what should be the most honorable term in American journalism—muckraking—and made it work again."**



**Above: Seldes (third from left) interviewing Yugoslavian leader Marshal Tito (far left) in Belgrade for *In Fact* in 1948. Below: Seldes's Vatican press pass from his days in Rome. Right: His *Chicago Tribune* press credentials, dated 1919.**



Seldes attended Harvard with John Reed, the author of *Ten Days That Shook the World* and the subject of Warren Beatty's 1981 epic film, *Reds* (in which Seldes himself was interviewed as a "witness" whose recollections were intercut with the film's action). He hung out in Greenwich Village with Walter Lippman; he questioned Vladimir Lenin and wrangled Leon Trotsky into posing for American photographers; he listened to Emma Goldman complain over breakfast about women copying her hairstyle; he watched Isadora Duncan, the libertine pioneer of modern dance, drink her troubles away; he attended D.H. Lawrence's funeral along with Aldous Huxley. His brother Gilbert, moreover, served as editor of *The Dial*, the legendary literary magazine founded by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and published T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. (Gilbert's son, Timothy Seldes, is today one of New York's most successful literary agents, and his daughter Marian Seldes is a highly regarded actress on the New York stage.)

Seldes was at the center of the menagerie—yet he seemed like neither a swashbuckling reporter nor an avatar of high society. With his slight figure and close-trimmed mustache, he looked more like a librarian than the rabble-rouser he was. He was an ardent leftist and antifascist, and his preferred style—on the page and off—was loud,

strident, and indignant. Before Mussolini chased him out of Italy, Seldes was impertinent enough to chastise the dictator in writing for his censorship of the press: "We are required to give facts, to relate happenings, not viewpoints of foreign governments." Seldes concluded his lecture to the leader of the country in which he was a guest by writing, contemptuously, "I hope I have made myself clear."

**T**hat sort of unyielding and impolitic righteousness earned Seldes more than his fair share of powerful enemies over the years—he liked to boast, for instance, that his name had been banned from the pages of *The New York Times* after he offended Edwin L. James, its managing editor at the time, by testifying against the paper in a 1934 lawsuit brought by the Newspaper Guild. (There is no direct evidence of such a blacklist, but a *New York Times* spokeswoman confirms that Seldes's name does not appear in the paper's archives after the late 1930s; the earliest contemporary mention of Seldes that *Brill's Content* could find in the paper occurred in 1981.) But by far Seldes's most enduring enemy was FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. *Brill's Content* has obtained a never-before-published record of Hoover's obsession: the FBI's 1,700-page Seldes file. The documents, which consist of FBI memos, case reports, copies of *In Fact*, and Hoover's correspondence relating to Seldes, stand knee-high and tell the story of the unlikely relationship—by turns comical, chilling, seedy, and even poignant—that developed over a quarter-century between the FBI director and the legendary reporter.

In Hoover, Seldes could not have had a more implacable, vicious, or paranoid foe. If Seldes embodied the bookish look of the intellectual leftist, Hoover was the polar opposite. He had the face of a boxer, with a thick neck to match, and was often described as dressing like a dandy—all fine suits and wide-brimmed G-man hats. By 1940, Hoover had been director of the FBI for 16 years and had cemented his power with a vault of secret dossiers on almost every person of public prominence. No tidbit was too prurient, too underhanded, too irrelevant, or too unreliable to be excluded. Homosexuality, alcoholism, sympathies for African-Americans, and—most of all—communist leanings were grist for Hoover's rumor mill, to be logged until they proved useful. He could ruin almost anyone he chose.

Hoover chose Seldes in November 1940, launching a chain of events that would bring together shadowy communists, inept FBI agents, the most powerful gossip columnist in the world, and the Nazi sympathizers who once ran *Reader's Digest*. Hoover's relentless vendetta would span five presidencies and two wars and would wind its way from New York to Texas to Vermont to Mexico to Europe and back again.

**Opposite: In *Freedom of the Press*, published in 1935, Seldes documented the influence of big business on news content. He decried censorship caused by advertiser pressure and called for an ethical code for reporters.**



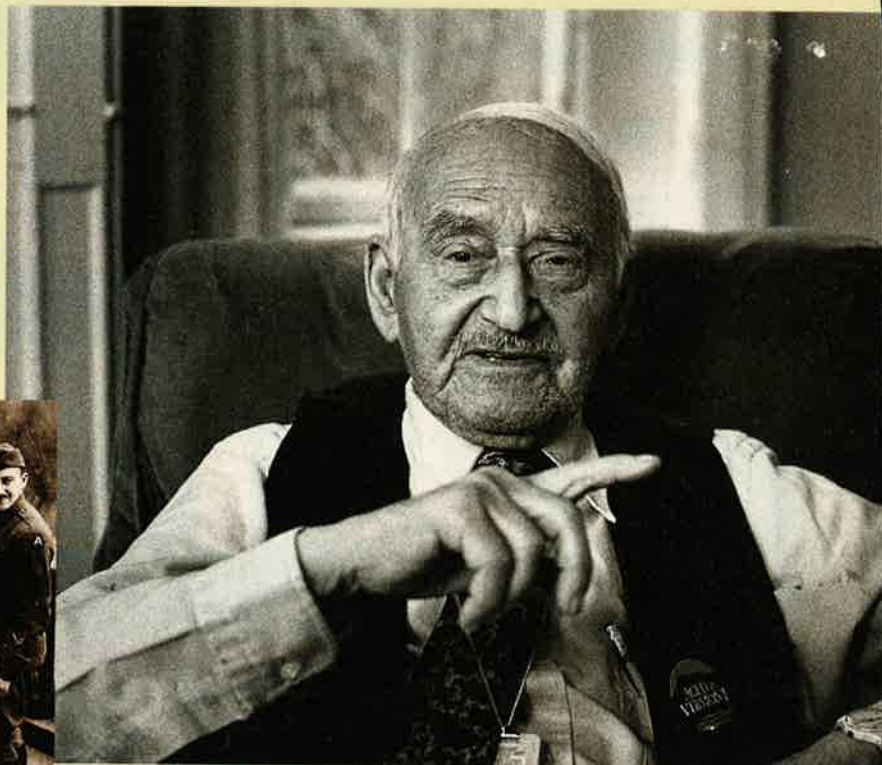
# FREEDOM *of the* PRESS



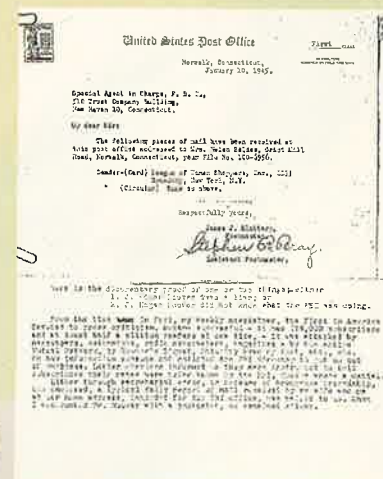
*by* **GEORGE SELDES**  
AUTHOR OF "YOU CAN'T PRINT THAT"



Right: In his later years, Seldes retired to Vermont. Below: Seldes (far right) with General John Pershing (center, with hat) covering World War I as an Army press correspondent. Standing second from right is Edwin L. James, who would later become the managing editor of *The New York Times* and one of Seldes's foes.



Left: A sketch of Seldes by an unknown artist circa 1929. Right: Seldes's proof that the FBI had been monitoring his wife's mail—a memo recording the names and addresses of Helen Seldes's correspondents that a postal employee accidentally revealed into an envelope addressed to her. Below: Seldes (circled at right) in 1922 in the Kremlin with Vladimir Lenin (center), Leon Trotsky (left), and the rest of the American press corps in Moscow.





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## Scripts On Deadline

the politician's past but replies, "With your permission, I'll make up my own mind about the fellow." As Platt says, "We had to protect their integrity as professionals." It's a head-scratching moment when the actor playing a professional can see the principles more clearly—and is more troubled by their absence—than the professionals themselves.

It points to a nostalgia that runs throughout *Deadline*, one that may prove the show's greatest asset but feels like its biggest flaw. Based on the two pilot episodes, the news that breaks in the *New York Ledger* exists outside the television news cycle, the AP wire, or the *Drudge Report*. For a show about deadlines, there doesn't seem to be much of a pressing need for them. And in an era when audiences for New York tabloids are stumbling (gutting each other with massive newsstand price cuts), *Deadline*'s dynamism and celebration of the crusading columnist—as shuffling and bloodshot-eyed as he may be—comes off as somehow innocent of deeper pressures: the need for print journalism to stay relevant in the face of exploding news outlets, to make money after newsstand profits get sliced in half, to find audiences again.

"With this show, we're hoping to show that while journalists might

be venal, cowardly, corrupt people in their private lives," says Palm, "occasionally they rise to heroism." The show will be seen as an earnest attempt to refurbish the reputation of "ink-stained wretches," as Wolf likes to call them. But the romanticism doesn't just apply to the characters. You hear the expression "compressed reality" constantly in the company of the writers and producers of *Deadline*—the need to shorten and intensify the life of the paper and the lives of those who produce it. But this compression means meeting more than the formal demand of a 44-minute window Monday nights at 9.

It's an expectation that the stories we share will find their endings: The shamefaced celebrity with an overactive sex drive won't be charged, the spoiled rich kid with the coke habit and violent streak will get a jail sentence, and the families of the murdered will be avenged. The idea that news has a narrative is one of the most romantic aspects to *Deadline*, but it's wrong to fault Wolf, Palm, and the others for making morality tales from the fragments we read in the paper. Wolf has insisted that his shows are merely entertainment; their appeal lies in the way they engineer closure. We want moral convictions in the second half of an episode because we trust that they are at the heart, but so seldom in the pressured practice, of our news. ■

## The Journalist and the G-Man

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 119] worst example of..." It was Weingarten's job to change that to "This is one of the worst examples...." Regardless, *In Fact*'s tone was, like Seldes, consistently left-wing, strident, and aggressive. Seldes was clearly happiest when denouncing people.

**O**n November 25, 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's press secretary, Stephen Early, wrote a one-sentence memo to J. Edgar Hoover, preserved in Seldes's FBI file: "Respectfully referred to J. Edgar Hoover for investigation and report." Enclosed was a copy of the 14th issue of the fledgling *In Fact*. Early presumably thought the newsletter merited the Hoover treatment because the lead story was a left-wing polemic against FDR's policies on labor unions and minorities, and it included a swipe at the FBI: "[T]he J. Edgar Hoover outfit...is attacking labor" by infiltrating unions and spying on "practically all liberals, progressives, intellectuals, and non-conformists."

Hoover demanded that his agents investigate Seldes, and they quickly zeroed in on Bruce Minton, who had cofounded *In Fact* and served as its associate editor under Seldes. On January 23, 1941, Hoover's agents filed the first of dozens of FBI case reports on Seldes. The report, revealed here for the first time, concluded that "MINTON is regarded as being a member of the Communist Party at present time. SELDES, although not a Communist of his own admission, is regarded as a close follower of the Communist doctrines." The FBI had only one source for the information: Victor Riesel, a journalist who would become a syndicated columnist for Hearst's *New York Mirror*. Riesel specialized in uncovering mob influence and corruption in the union movement—years later, he was blinded in an acid attack attributed to the mob. Riesel had told the FBI that "the Communist Party purposely furnished the necessary funds to SELDES to start out the publication."

Although *In Fact* was Minton's idea, his time at the newsletter was brief. Seldes thought Minton editorialized too much, and within a year Minton had cut ties entirely from the paper, leaving the enterprise to Seldes. Riesel's statement to the FBI, however, fueled Hoover's belief over the next two decades that the Communist Party had funded *In Fact*, that the party had gotten its money from the Soviet Union, and that Seldes should be prosecuted as an agent of foreign influence (simply being a communist, even in the days of the Red

Scare, was not illegal). The problem was that there was no evidence to support Riesel's claim. Seldes, at this point, had no clue he was of interest to Hoover's FBI.

In its early years, *In Fact* quickly became notorious, as indicated by the volume of letters concerned citizens sent to the FBI asking the bureau's opinion of this new and potentially subversive newsletter. It was not uncommon for members of the public to write to Hoover. They asked his advice, inquired as to whether their neighbor was a communist, turned in their friends as Reds, and occasionally wrote proclamations of innocence if they believed (usually wrongly) that they might be suspected of something. Seldes and *In Fact* triggered a stream of complaints. One person—the name is blacked out in the file—wrote on letterhead from The Pennsylvania State College's architecture department to let Hoover know that he was receiving *In Fact* against his will: "As I did not like the looks of the publication and prefer not to have anything enter my home in which Seldes is connected, I wrote and asked that my name be removed from the publication's mailing list." Apparently it did no good, and *In Fact* kept arriving. "In case of any eventuality I wish to state now that I have never subscribed to *IN FACT*, nor to any other publication of that ilk." Hoover's reply, included in the file, assured the worried academic, "You may be sure that your letter will be made a matter of permanent record."

**I**n May 1941, the file discloses, Hoover received a note from gossip king Walter Winchell, who often swapped tips with Hoover. It sparked a war of words that would change Seldes's life. Winchell had enclosed a letter from a reader of his column asking Winchell's opinion of *In Fact*. Winchell replied to the reader, a New Yorker named Thomas A. Murphy, that he had passed the query to Hoover. "I am not familiar with Mr. Seldes's publication as I do not see it," Winchell added. (That statement was probably false, as Winchell's assistant was in the habit of passing stories to *In Fact* that Winchell rejected if she thought they deserved to be published.)

Murphy's letter to Winchell concerned a May 1941 *In Fact* article about Harry Bridges, a labor leader the FBI had accused of exhorting the violent overthrow of the government. The article was an inflammatory defense of Bridges and accused Hoover and his agents of conducting an unprincipled campaign against the labor movement with no regard for civil liberties.

Hoover appears to have lost his cool when he saw the letter. He sent a two-page response, a copy of which is included in the file,



directly to Murphy condemning Seldes and his scandal sheet. Hoover wrote that the sources of *In Fact's* information were the Communist Party, "elements of the underworld" (meaning organized crime), and "individuals who have been misled and misinformed." He accused Seldes of publishing "a collection of lies and falsehoods."

What Hoover didn't know was that Murphy, whom Hoover had evidently mistaken for one of his concerned citizen correspondents, was actually an *In Fact* subscriber who had simply asked Winchell, a staunch Hoover ally, for his thoughts on the Bridges story. No doubt surprised by Hoover's angry letter, Murphy forwarded it to Seldes. On July 21, Seldes wrote a challenge to Hoover, preserved in the file. "If you will point out one statement or one word in *IN FACT* which is not true or honestly reported, I will print your correction," Seldes wrote. "You cannot brush off these charges by yelling 'reds.'" The episode was the first indication Seldes had that he was being scrutinized by Hoover.

Before Hoover had a chance to reply, Seldes struck again, on the front page of the July 28, 1941, *In Fact*: "FBI's head, J. Edgar Hoover, writes an angry letter to an *IN FACT* reader [and is] smearing all his critics as reds, criminals or misinformed and ignorant persons."

Seldes, always game for a fight, rankled Hoover with this last broadside. Hoover was incensed, and his anger can be measured in the 15-page, single-spaced memo—typed entirely in italics—that he sent to Seldes on August 27. The letter, which is included in Seldes's file, offered a point-by-point reply to the Bridges story, calling one accusation—that Hoover's regime was so heavy-handed that FBI clerks' visits to rest rooms were timed—"a malicious lie." "I shall now observe with interest the action which you will take since being advised of the facts, and of course, I shall be very glad for you to quote my letter," Hoover told Seldes. "I have taken you at your word." Seldes wrote back to Hoover promising to print an edited version of his letter, but on October 4 Hoover replied: "I must insist that if the letter is published that it be published in its entirety." (The exchange is contained in the file.) Seldes chose to print none of it, a decision he would come to regret.

**B**y the late 1940s, the FBI's investigation had taken on a Keystone Kops quality. Hoover's agents, desperate to please their boss, were frantically following every lead, no matter how silly. In 1950, the FBI noted a bizarre theory from one of its informants that *In Fact* was being used to plant communist moles inside *Reader's Digest*, the largest-circulation magazine in the country and a bulwark of right-wing values. One FBI memo in the Seldes file records this allegation from the unnamed source, who apparently had infiltrated the Communist Party: "[*In Fact*], as I know from discussions in the Politburo, was established to reach a wide group of people, particularly in the educational system, but [copies of *In Fact* were] also planted in the Pleasantville [N.Y.] area in order that its staff and associated Communists might infiltrate the staff of the *Reader's Digest*. The Party leaders considered that a very important task at that time."

But the only discernible "connection" between *Reader's Digest* and Seldes was a 1947 *In Fact* report that named three "fascist" employees at *Reader's Digest*—and a number of U.S. congressmen—who had associated with convicted Nazi spy George Sylvester Viereck during World War II.

Seldes's former colleague Victor Weingarten, who lives in Manhattan and is retired from a career in public relations, remembers the story well. Weingarten occasionally spends time in the midtown office of his defunct PR firm, where he was interviewed by *Brill's Content*. Though he has occupied the office for years, the place still looks like he just moved in. Weingarten also spent 25 years working at the Insti-

tute of Public Affairs, a think tank that advised the federal government on social policy, and served as its president before it closed, in the early 1980s. A signed photo of Richard Nixon, thanking Weingarten for his efforts, hangs on a wall.

In 1943, Weingarten says, the Justice Department ordered a study of Nazi sympathizers in the U.S., including *Reader's Digest* editors, which it decided to keep secret. This did not please its author, a Justice Department official named O. John Rogge, whom Weingarten persuaded to leak the report to *In Fact*. The story came out while Rogge was traveling. His plane made an unscheduled stop in Spokane, and he was kicked off the flight. Then two FBI agents approached Rogge in the terminal, removed him of all Justice Department property, and fired him on the spot.

The episode characterizes the relationship between Weingarten and Seldes—the FBI referred to Weingarten as Seldes's "leg man." "George was in charge of indignation and I was in charge of informa-

**In 1950, the FBI noted a bizarre theory from one of its informants that *In Fact* was being used to plant communist moles inside *Reader's Digest*, the largest-circulation magazine in the country and a bulwark of right-wing values.**

tion," Weingarten says.

Though he hasn't made an effort to obtain it, Weingarten probably has his own FBI file inside the bureau's vaults. One memo in the Seldes file has a sinister handwritten note from Hoover on the bottom: "Also we ought to get a line on Weingarten."

**W**hile the FBI was bungling, Seldes was indignant about the continuing probe against him. In 1945, for example, he wrote to Hoover to complain that his wife, Helen, was being harassed by the Feds: She had been questioned and searched while traveling to and from Mexico, and mail addressed to her at their Norwalk home was being opened at the local post office at the behest of the FBI.

According to bureau memos in the file, Hoover checked into Seldes's claims, and most of them turned out to be true. The FBI had requested that "SIS [Special Intelligence Service] agents in Mexico City" follow Helen while she was across the border, and her baggage had been searched by U.S. customs agents when she returned from Mexico. In addition, FBI agents had searched her hotel room in Fort Worth, Texas, during the trip, finding "negative results except for an empty rum bottle and three empty packages of cigarettes," one memo states.

Hoover's reply to Seldes's allegations, included in the file, was a masterpiece of half-truth: World War II was still raging during Helen's trip, he wrote, and travelers had to put up with certain inconveniences. "[N]either I nor any of the personnel of the Federal Bureau of Investigation can be held responsible for the 'loitering'...of 'native Mexicans,'" Hoover wrote in a September 10, 1945, letter to Seldes. He then went on to reassure Seldes that he was trying to find out whether anyone had been authorized to screen Helen's mail, and if anyone had "you may rest assured that instructions will be issued for the immediate discontinuance of such coverage."

For some reason, Seldes spared Hoover the humiliation he would have faced if Seldes had explained precisely how he knew that Helen's mail was being monitored. The FBI had required the Norwalk post office to record the name and address of each of Helen's correspondents and periodically to mail the information to the New Haven office of the bureau. It appears that a Norwalk postal worker had accidentally dropped one such report into a letter addressed to Helen and resealed it at the post office. The bureau was nonplussed. "Apparently a 'leak' has



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developed somewhere in the post office at Norwalk," an internal report in the file states. Oral instructions were issued to stop the mail tap.

**T**hough Hoover's crusade against Seldes was often comically inept, it became increasingly vicious as the Cold War began, and the FBI eventually had a hand in putting *In Fact* out of business.

In January 1948, during President Harry Truman's term, Representative Clare Hoffman of Michigan contacted the FBI, trolling for information about communists that he could use to his political advantage. According to one file memo from the agent who spoke to Hoffman, the congressman "stated he felt called upon to start the new year right by exposing George Seldes of *In Fact*....He would not attribute anything to the bureau."

Hoover sent Hoffman a hefty dossier that summarized what the bureau knew about Seldes. It included an abstract of the 15-page response to the Bridges saga, which had transpired seven years earlier. This was most likely illegal, since at the time the FBI was forbidden to release its files without the consent of the attorney general. Hoffman turned around and read the entire tract into the *Congressional Record*. It contained no evidence that Seldes was a communist but plenty of guilt by insinuation. By leaking the file to Hoffman, Hoover ensured that the red-baiting media—almost all of the newspapers in the country—was at last able to report what the FBI considered to be the dirt on Seldes.

The *Chicago Tribune*, once Seldes's employer and by now staunchly conservative, seized upon Hoffman's allegations. One of its wire service stories was headlined "Seldes Dubbed Goose-Stepper for Red Press"; another was titled "Seldes Lies and Vilifies, House Told; Warned He Has Perverted Mind." *Life* magazine joined in with a feature story: "Dupes and Fellow Travelers Dress Up Communist Fronts." The article was accompanied by photographs of Seldes and other prominent "communists," such as Langston Hughes, Albert Einstein, and Lillian Hellman.

When the innuendo contained in Hoover's investigation was made public, the tide began to turn against Seldes. His liberal subscribers, alarmed at the growing witch hunt, began to cancel in droves. But *In Fact* was also getting pinched by the communist left: In 1948, Seldes had taken a trip to what was then called Yugoslavia and interviewed Marshal Tito for *In Fact*. Seldes was impressed with Tito and publicly supported his split from Joseph Stalin and his push toward "democratic socialism" in Eastern Europe. The pro-Tito, anti-Stalin stories Seldes published angered those subscribers who were actual communists, and the party ordered its members to cancel their subscriptions. "[We were] John Steinbeck leftists," Weingarten says. "We got run down by traffic from both sides."

On October 2, 1950, two years after Hoover's baseless allegations against him became public, Seldes published the last edition of *In Fact*. It consisted entirely of an editorial from Seldes denying that he was a communist and explained that, because of a decline in subscriptions, he had been "forced to announce [*In Fact*] is suspending publication, temporarily."

**T**he suspension, of course, became permanent. In 1950, at the age of 60, Seldes retired to Vermont. At this point, one might reasonably have expected Hoover to give up his crusade and allow Seldes to enjoy his retirement as the man who made it okay to print bad things about the news business (not to mention the FBI). Not a chance.

In July 1953, as the Korean War was ending, Seldes was summoned from Vermont by the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations to be questioned by Roy Cohn, Senator Joseph McCarthy's lieutenant. It had been 13 years since the FBI director had targeted the bespectacled reporter, and Seldes was finally able to confirm for Hoover the very "evidence," such that it was, he had sought all along—and to dodge prosecution one last time.

"Are you a member of the Communist Party?" Cohn asked Seldes in a closed session, according to the congressional transcript. The question began a verbal dance that was all too familiar at the height of the McCarthy era. "No," Seldes replied. "Have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?" Again: "No."

"Do you know any Communist Party members?" Cohn asked. At this point in the transcript, Seldes appears to have become a little flustered. "Well, look, do I know them or—Well, look, for instance—I want to tell you this frankly." The committee chairman chided Seldes for talking faster than the stenographer could type. "I have ulcers and am sort of the nervous type," Seldes joked. "I started a weekly newsletter with another man. His name on the letterhead was Bruce Minton. I swear I had no idea he was a Communist. He was expelled from the Communist Party, I think, 1945....If I know any Communists? I know Bruce Minton [but] I didn't know it until he had left my publication and was thrown out of the Party."

Seldes had received a 4,500-word letter from Minton earlier that year, which Minton called a "confession" and Seldes published in his 1968 book, *Never Tire of Protesting*. The letter, which describes Seldes in glowing terms and exhibits precisely the sort of puffery that Seldes might have railed against in the complacent mainstream press of his day, confirmed that the Communist Party had, through Minton,

**On October 2, 1950, two years after Hoover's allegations became public, Seldes published the last edition of *In Fact*. It consisted entirely of an editorial from Seldes denying that he was a communist and explained that, because of a decline in subscriptions, he had been "forced to announce [*In Fact*] is suspending publication, temporarily."**

attempted to use Seldes and *In Fact* as a front to popularize communist ideas. But Seldes, according to Minton's letter, had proved too independent and intractable, and when Minton left *In Fact* after less than a year, the party's involvement with the publication ended. "To the horror and disappointment of the Party," Minton's letter read, "Mr. Seldes proved to be beyond the usual methods of persuasion; his integrity, his personal honesty and forthrightness, his convictions were such that the Party was helpless."

Was Seldes really unaware of the Communist Party's connection to *In Fact*? Or was this a clever subterfuge devised after the fact by Minton to clear Seldes with McCarthy? After all, Minton was already living in exile abroad and was facing more than one grand jury investigation in New York for his political activities. He was well situated to serve as a fall guy for Seldes.

"I have no grounds to doubt Minton's account of the beginnings of *In Fact*," says the filmmaker Goldsmith, "nor to doubt that Seldes knew nothing of the intentions of Minton as a Communist Party member."

Seldes's niece, the Tony Award-winning actress Marian Seldes, concurs that her uncle had no clue about Minton. "Knowing my uncle's history, if he said something was true, it was true," she says. Marian, 72, will appear in January in a New York production of Edward Albee's *The Play About the Baby*. "I cannot imagine him bluffing or lying or dissembling." This was, after all, the man who had risked his life to expose Mussolini's death squads.



## The Journalist and the G-Man

Minton was independently wealthy, which may explain Seldes's ignorance of his motives—it would have come as no surprise to Seldes that Minton had ready access to money. Minton used two names: Richard Bransten, his given name, and Bruce Minton, his communist nom de plume; he and his wife, Ruth McKenney, were relatively well known in literary circles as champagne socialists. McKenney, in fact, was the author of a wildly popular collection of *New Yorker* short stories called *My Sister Eileen*, which was made into a 1955 film of the same name starring a young Jack Lemmon. Minton and McKenney were ousted from the Communist Party in 1946 (for “revisionism,” as one FBI memo in the Seldes file put it) after they had turned over most of their money.

Minton met a dismal end. After he left *In Fact* and was kicked out of the party, he settled in England, presumably to avoid the reach of American authorities. In 1955, he killed himself with an overdose of sleeping pills.

Marian's brother Timothy Seldes, a 74-year-old New York literary agent (he owns the Russell & Volkening agency, which represents Nadine Gordimer, among others), does allow that his uncle may have turned a blind eye to Minton's scheme if it meant he could get his own publication. “If Bruce Minton came on to him as a passionate believer” in the mission of *In Fact*, says Timothy, then that, coupled with “George's need for money, made him not think about it. I think he must have suspected.”

Certainly, Minton's influence on *In Fact* was brief and, in the end, negligible. “I've read at least part of every [issue] of *In Fact*,” says Goldsmith, “and they all unmistakably bear Seldes's imprint....It's clear that the paper is Seldes's and not Minton's.”

**I**n 1958, the Bridges story—in which *In Fact* had criticized Hoover for his attacks on labor leader Harry Bridges 17 years earlier—resurfaced. Hoover had written a book called *Masters of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America and How to Fight It*. Seldes had read it and, out of the blue, wrote Hoover a letter, which is included in the file, extending a warm hand of apology through the Cold War frost. “Dear Mr. Hoover: You may (or may not) remember me: when I was editing and publishing *In Fact*, a weekly newsletter, we had some correspondence and I have frequently thought of it,” Seldes wrote. He congratulated

Hoover on the book and then raised the subject of the Bridges story and Hoover's long response to the allegations: “It was my intention to publish it with a rebuttal by the man who wrote the article [a researcher who joined *In Fact* after Minton left] but he ‘resigned,’ and nothing else appeared. I may say that in my 49 years of journalism this failure to set the record straight is the only item that fills me with regret.”

The apology to Hoover for not printing his letter in full, after the FBI had hunted him for nearly 18 years, was typical Seldes. He'd spent ten years holding the press accountable when it was unfair, and he did not let himself get away with the lapse on the Bridges story. On the advice of his colleagues, Hoover did not reply to the letter. “Though Seldes now feigns friendship for the Bureau, it is believed that he might in the future utilize a letter from the Director for his own personal advantage,” one FBI functionary concluded in a memo contained in the file. Hoover added in his own scrawl, “I agree.”

Later that same year, Seldes wrote to Hoover again, this time to request his permission to reprint something that Hoover had once said in a book Seldes was writing, *The Great Quotations* (which was, as its title suggests, a collection of quotations). The FBI had an internal debate, chronicled in file memos, over whether it should reply. The agents concluded, as before, “that the attached letter from Seldes not be acknowledged.” But then Hoover changed his mind. “On 12-4-58 the Director advised [his agent] that Seldes' letter should be acknowledged.” Hoover replied, “Thank you for your letter....The quotations which you attributed to me are accurate, and I appreciate your courtesy in giving me the opportunity to confirm them.”

But that was as courteous as Hoover was prepared to be. The FBI kept tabs on Seldes and his wife for six more years, going so far as to monitor their European vacations. On December 1, 1964, 24 years after it had been opened, the final memorandum in the file reads: “The case is being returned to Closed status.”

On November 16, 1990, George Seldes made headlines when he announced on his 100th birthday that he was finally getting rid of his 70-year-old typewriter, a Royal manual. *The Nation* sent a reporter to ask him why. He figured he'd already written everything there is to write, he replied. Timothy Seldes rescued the typewriter upon which every missive to Hoover had been written, in addition to some of the biggest stories of the century. It sits in his New York office today. ■

## THE OMBUDSMAN

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 32] And in that terrific little piece by Mimi Sheraton—an investigative report about recipes, of all things [“Twice Cooked,” Notebook]—this was the end:

“And after looking through [David] Ruggerio's book, [Giuliano] Bugialli nominated three more recipes he says Ruggerio cribbed from him. ‘He did it all in a very stupid way,’ said Bugialli, ‘changing only a tiny ingredient. He is also stupid to suggest roasting a hen for the chicken with bread crumb sauce. It must be a rooster.’”

He chuckled.

**The editors respond:** Michael Gartner is completely right about the subtle use of words. When we say “contend” instead of “explain” we are doing it on purpose, to signal to readers that we're especially skeptical. As for our lack of identification of both Jonah Goldberg and Jeffrey Klein in the Contributors notes, from this point forward we'll include both their bios consistently because their political and ideological backgrounds are relevant to their opinion columns.

**Frank Luntz responds:** Mr. Gartner neglects to inform readers that more

than a dozen reporters personally attended at least one of the Instant Response party convention sessions criticized in his column (they were not traditional “focus groups”). These reporters and 20 of their colleagues felt that the sessions were sufficiently reflective (notice I did not use the word “representative”) of swing voters to report the results.

Mr. Gartner also does not tell readers that the collective reaction of these carefully selected Instant Response participants more accurately reflected public reaction to the two conventions than many of the career pundits. Imagine that: The people themselves are more indicative of public opinion than those paid to analyze it. I wish Mr. Gartner had taken just 90 seconds out of his busy day to call me before repeating unjustified criticisms.

One reason Americans so distrust the press is the perception that the news they are given is distorted. Coincidentally, it's this distortion that led to Mr. Gartner's “resignation” from NBC News after the *Dateline* General Motors Corporation fiasco.

**Michael Gartner responds:** Mr. Luntz's response does not even remotely address the issues raised by his colleagues or by this column. ■