

Newsreel Films Seized

Liberation News Service

1969

NEW YORK (LNS) — Three Newsreel photographers just back from North Vietnam have sued the State Department, U.S. Customs, and Trans World Airlines to recover movie film which was seized through trickery and deceit by government authorities at Kennedy International Airport.

The photographers—Robert Kramer, Norman Fruchter and John Douglas—shot some 12,000 feet of 16 mm black and white film in North Vietnam. In the suit, Newsreel accused the government of trying to “harass and intimidate” them for exercising their “First Amendment right of criticising American foreign policy by the making of a film about the war against the Vietnamese people.”

The three Newsreel people accompanied a delegation of movement people who went to Hanoi to accompany three U.S. pilots released from prison by the Vietnamese. They spent two weeks travelling around the Vietnamese countryside.

A State Department official involved in meeting the pilots had assured the Newsreel crew that the film would go through customs without hassles. But once in Kennedy airport, the State Department man disappeared from view.

Customs tried to seize the film then, but an arrangement was made to leave the film temporarily with Trans World Airlines. TWA later turned the film over to Customs anyway, and it was then given to the Army Pictorial Lab for processing.

Customs officials cited a federal statute that prohibits the importation of printed matter or pictures “advocating or urging treason or insurrection against the United States, or forcible resistance to any law of the United States.” Newsreel says the law is unconstitutional.

Newsreel charged that “the forces that are at work are some combination of the State Department, the Defense Department and the CIA.”

The film includes some “premium footage” of North Vietnam—scenes taken from the ground, which is rare. Presumably, the Army hopes the film will give them some way of evaluating the effects of their bombing.

Another possibility, the photographers charged, is that the Army lab, in processing the film without supervision by the people who shot it, could develop it improperly, and ruin it for future use.

Judge Jacob Mishler, visibly angry at the actions of the government, ordered that the film be prepared immediately for screening in court. The government attorneys, who at first said it would take a week to get the film ready, promised to bring it the next day.

In court, the government said that it would make only one print, but Newsreel plans to carry on with their constitutional challenge of the statute. All radical media people who have had hassles with customs are invited to join in the case and should contact Newsreel’s lawyers, William Crane and Harold Katz, Law Commune, 37 Union Square West, 4th Floor, N.Y., N.Y. 10003.



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