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No lie was too outrageous for Providence Journal editor John R. **Rathom**.

While Europe was struggling in a world war that America was reluctant to enter, **Rathom** traveled as an after-dinner speaker, spinning fantastic fabrications about his newspaper's role in uncovering the activities of German spies.

He claimed the paper's wireless station had intercepted secret German communications. He suggested that The Journal had planted agents in foreign embassies. He claimed he had barely escaped an assassination attempt orchestrated by a German diplomat.

All lies.

In truth, The Providence Journal had acquired numerous inside scoops on German activities, mostly from British intelligence sources who used **Rathom** to plant anti-German stories in the American media. Newspapers across the country reprinted The Providence Journal exclusives, magnifying **Rathom's** myth that he was directing a cadre of counterspies.

The pinnacle of **Rathom's** deceptions may have been a year-long series of articles he agreed to write for World's Work, a national magazine of the early 20th century.

The series was advertised this way:

"More thrilling than fiction . . . it is the modestly told story of a brave editor and resourceful reporters who beat the Germans at their own game."

In the first installment, February 1918, **Rathom** identified a German military attaché "who conceived the plot to stop The Providence Journal's exposures by blowing up its editor with a bomb placed in his office. The bomb was exploded and almost achieved its purpose." He claimed to have escaped with "slight burns."

It wasn't the first time **Rathom** had said the Germans tried to blow him up. In a speech before the Empire Club, in Toronto in June 1917, he had claimed: "In spite of the fact that we have had our own building guarded night and day we were blown up, the front of our entire building was blown out . . ." He claimed "positive knowledge" that the bomb had been "German propaganda work."

Of course, the walls of the Journal building had not been "blown out." There had been a fire on the building's third floor, March 2, 1916. A five-paragraph report in the paper the next day said the "fire and explosion" caused \$3,000 in damage and that its origin was "a mystery."

After World's Work published the first installment of **Rathom's** series, the U.S. Department of Justice contacted the magazine's editor and offered to show him the true "evidence" of **Rathom's** wartime activities, according to a summary of a New York Times story on **Rathom** that appeared in The Chronicle magazine in 1920.

After visiting the Justice Department, World's Work canceled the rest of the **Rathom** series, and substituted its own staff-written series entitled: "Fighting Germany's Spies." The first of these stories ran with an editor's note: "By courtesy of the Bureau of Investigation of the Department of Justice the facts and documents of this narrative have been verified."

Rathom was called before a federal grand jury in New York in 1918 to testify under oath about the stories the newspaper had been publishing about German plots, according to The Chronicle.

To get out of testifying, **Rathom** agreed to write a letter confessing that many of his claims had been grossly exaggerated or invented:

"The Providence Journal's sources of information have given us valuable knowledge of a great many matters . . . we have felt compelled to cover them up by intentionally suggesting sources which did not actually exist. One specific illustration of this is the statement that the Providence Journal's own representatives were placed in the German and Austrian Embassies and in several of the foreign consular offices throughout the country. It is not true that the Providence Journal's own representatives ever occupied positions of this kind."

The letter went on that way for several pages.

The government kept **Rathom's** letter secret for two years, and then released it to the press in 1920 after **Rathom** attacked then-Navy Secretary Franklin Delano Roosevelt in print.

The Nation magazine in 1920 summed up **Rathom's** confession: "The vaunted exploits of his editors and reporters he has now admitted were myths, and what little information he did have as the basis for his sensations was supplied by British secret agents whose tool he was, and who used him for their own purposes."

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JOHN R. RATHOM

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