

Culture of Secrecy*

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In his book, **Secrecy and Democracy**, the former director of U.S. Central Intelligence Agency raised the issue that is at the heart of a debate over America's intelligence services. The spy service under his control, he wrote, "strongly resisted my efforts to employ it to take the pulse of foreign countries; first, because semi-covert collection was not in its tradition, and such activity was not considered espionage by the professionals. Second, because the CIA had become too accustomed to living and working in comfortable cities abroad; not enough of its people were out in the remote areas."¹

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet empire, the CIA finds itself fighting for its institutional life. It stands accused by former top intelligence chiefs of having failed the mission for which it was founded: to provide political leaders with accurate assessments of the political, economic, and military state of the Soviet Union. Writing later about this "enormous failure", Turner made an extraordinary assertion in a 1991 Foreign Affairs article: "I have never heard a suggestion from the CIA, or the intelligence arms of the departments of defense or state, that numerous Soviets recognized a growing, systemic economic decay."²

The Agency, another critic wrote, was left "virtually in the dark about the Soviet bloc's political, economic, and societal decay, as well as the speed with which Communism would collapse in Eastern Europe." The CIA had kept overestimating the performance of the Soviet economy, "leading many to speculate that the numbers were hyped to fuel the arms race."³

Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a former vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, made an even more sweeping statement: "For a quarter century," he said, "the CIA has been

* Discussion paper for the round table on "Intelligence and national security at the beginning of the 21st Century", Dubrovnik, Croatia, October 27-28, 2000.

epeatedly wrong about the major political and economic questions entrusted to its analysis."⁴

And another high official, General William Odom, former director of the National Security Agency, proposed that the CIA should be disbanded: "You could close down the DDI (Intelligence Analysis Directorate) tomorrow and nobody would miss it. The only serious issue here is whether you want to continue to pay all these people. I guess you keep idle intelligentsia off the streets. I consider by and large their analytical effort a welfare transfer package."⁵

Such harsh judgments by the men responsible for U.S. intelligence are astonishing, especially since they suggest that ignorance prevailed within what was supposed to be our most capable service, and existed particularly in the scrutiny of its primary target. Before proceeding any further, I would like to state that I disagree with the above quoted gentlemen.

Judgements about the CIA's performance must be placed in context of time – the decline and collapse of the Soviet Union. They also must take into account an inconvenient, yet basic aspect of espionage: all intelligence services serve their political masters. Or to use a more colorful way of saying it (to quote one of the prominent participants in this round table) "however sharp may be the instincts of an intelligence service, it is always the toy of the government it services."⁶ Indeed, in my judgement, the problems that led to the decline in the agency's prestige and self-image were caused by the misuse of the CIA by its political masters, especially during the Nixon and Reagan administrations. The White House tapes reveal that Nixon's efforts to use the CIA for domestic political purposes – a clear violation of the law – were thwarted by its long-time director, Richard Helms, a career CIA officer.

This is the basic problem. Intelligence services exist to a large extent to do the dirty work which politicians want executed, but for which they do not want to shoulder responsibility. The CIA has long been the favorite scapegoat for various failures. It is easy to blame – since, by the very nature of its work, it cannot fight back in public.

But this is only a part of the problem. The other part is the CIA's obsession with secrecy, and its fascination with being covert, which has undermined its effectiveness. The agency operates under constraints it has created for itself. Secrecy both protects and blinds it.

What are these self-imposed constraints?

One is the Agency's culture of secrecy. It does not collect information unless it is secret. Anecdotal evidence shows the ludicrous extent of this attitude. Columnist Lars-Erik Nelson reported a story recently in the wake of rumors that Cuba's Fidel Castro

had died. Top officials who had gathered in the White House tried to assess the situation just as Radio Havana was announcing that Castro had just granted an interview to a group of Mexican journalists. "Someone at the meeting looked at the CIA rep and asked if we had called the Mexican to verify the report," Nelson wrote. "The CIA guy, said, 'We don't do covert collection'."

Another is its long-range approach. Despite all the movies and books about devil-may-care, swashbuckling agents, U.S. spies almost universally are engaged in banal paper work under diplomatic cover. They operate inside embassies, live in special compounds, and are content to do their work by proxy. They sit in their offices unwilling, and in many cases unable, to wander around their host country and talk with local inhabitants. They have to avoid such contact for fear of eventual problems with the polygraph. In Moscow, for example, any "fraternization" with Russian nationals was immediately regarded as potential "contamination".

From this flows a variety of problems that burden the Agency. Frequently, CIA officers are not even linguistically equipped to do their work. I knew the CIA station chief in Moscow – at the height of the Cold War in the early 1980s – and he was unable to even say "good morning" in Russian. This was not an isolated case. Reuel Gerecht, a former CIA officer, notes in his book that at the time "the American embassy was taken over in Iran in 1979, not a single Agency officer in Tehran spoke Persian."⁷ Now, according to one government source, if you want to know who the agents are in the U.S. embassy, look for the ones who don't speak the language.

By contrast, regular foreign service officers (in my experience, those dealing with cultural affairs and trade, as well as U.S. military attaches) are encouraged to mix with the local population and aggressively entertain. Unlike the CIA, neither the State nor the Defense Departments subject their people to the polygraph. Hence, State and Defense officials usually provide sounder on the spot assessments. Diplomats who focus on cultural matters are particularly productive, as they can mingle freely and snoop because they have nothing to hide, no secret identities to protect, and no requests to account for every minute of their day.

The celebrated Daniloff affair illustrates the point. State Department officials in Moscow immediately concluded that a Russian Orthodox priest who had offered secret information to the CIA was an agent provocateur; the CIA wrongly concluded that the priest was genuine and was caught in the act of trying to recruit him.

The never-ending conflict between secrecy and intelligence is, in fact, a vicious circle. It diminishes the value of the Agency's output without eliminating entirely the possibility of turncoats inside its

ranks. While this serves as a powerful justification for the Agency's obsession with counter-intelligence – after all, it only takes one Aldrich Ames to destroy years of work by thousands of people – it also raises the question whether money is being spent wisely.

The “tyranny” of pervasive secrecy – according to a former CIA analyst turned professor, Marvin Ott – has isolated the Agency from the outside world about which it is supposed to be so well informed. Its ways are incestuous. People tend to fraternize with others who inhabit their secret cocoon, Ott says: “The more professional contact one has on the outside, the more likely one will have trouble with the polygraph.”⁸

My experience as intelligence correspondent for the Washington Post in 1986-87 left me with the distinct impression that the Agency is far larger in imagination than in life. Intelligence is a service industry; its consumers dictate the shape of its production. During most of the Reagan years, however, the agency was headed by William Casey, the president's campaign manager. Bobby Inman, who served as Casey's deputy for a year, described him publicly as an overzealous buccaneer.

Casey had a long-standing love for covert action, dating back to his OSS experience in World War Two. Reagan had made Casey a member of the Cabinet, the first time in history that the CIA director had gained that status. Casey politicized intelligence. He opposed arms control talks with Moscow. He ignored legal niceties and sabotaged Secretary of State, George Shultz, in Nicaragua and Iran, and on arms control. The 1986 Iran-contra affair revealed that there were whole areas of U.S. activities about which the Secretary of State and the rest of the government knew nothing. Casey had virtually usurped the prerogatives of the Secretary of State and had run an alternative foreign policy.

Casey could do all these things because he controlled the analytical process, the estimates, covert action, and counter-intelligence. In his memoirs, Shultz later wrote that Casey's views “were so strong and so ideological that they invariably colored his selection and assessments of materials. I could not rely on what he said, nor could I accept without question the objectivity of intelligence that he put out, especially in policy sensitive areas.”⁹

Casey had promoted a young Agency analyst, Robert Gates, as his deputy, largely because of his hardline anti-Communism. Gates systematically overstated the “evidence” on Soviet arms procurement programs, and the state of the Soviet economy in general, in order to buttress his belief that, even after Gorbachev took power, nothing was changing in the Soviet Union. When asked by the Senate Intelligence panel on March 16, 1986, what the Agency was doing to prepare American policy-makers for the consequences of Gorbachev's reforms, Gates replied: “Quite frankly, without any hint that such fundamental change is going

on, my resources do not permit me the luxury of sort of just idly speculating on what a different Soviet Union might look like."

Most serious CIA analysts did not share Gates' assessment, but their voices were not heard. Objections advanced by the Directorate of Intelligence were quashed. Richard Kerr, the then DDI, attempted to get a dissenting view (on one of the key indications of Soviet intentions) which was included as a footnote to the National Intelligence Estimate on Soviet strategic forces; the footnote, however, never saw the light of day.

As late as 1988, Gates, in his briefings to Congressional leaders, portrayed the Soviet Union as "a mighty nation confronting us everywhere – confident, unchanging and determined." A full three years after Gorbachev had begun reforms that eventually cost him his country and his job, Gates insisted in a speech that nothing was changing in Russia and that "the dictatorship of the Communist party remains untouched and untouchable", adding that "a long, competitive struggle still lies before us." The man who made these assertions was rewarded. Two years later, he was appointed director of Central Intelligence.

The author of the unfortunate footnote, Douglas MacEachin, director of the Office of Soviet Analysis from 1984-89, put it this way: "The period during which I felt I had the least impact (on policy) was during the Reagan administration. They thought of us as the enemy... The implication was that part of the national threat was that the CIA undercut our ability to rebuild our national forces. The administration charged the CIA with being too liberal. It said we underestimated the military threat, underestimated the Soviet threat in the Third World."

Kirsten Lundberg, who interviewed scores of CIA officers for the Harvard study, said many of them "felt that Casey and Gates had ensured that the (Agency's) final product made the most damaging case possible against the Soviets, based on what they considered flimsy evidence." Dissenters, however, were intimidated. Some were accused of being "soft" on Communism. People whose assessments differed from Casey's were considered "Communist sympathizers."

Robert Blackwell, a senior CIA officer, described the tension in the CIA headquarters: "It was palpable. Whether anything was being twisted or recorded upstairs or not, people felt that they were under an extra burden to somehow be very careful about how things were said. Papers that were exceptionally hard hitting and very negative about whatever ... didn't seem to get quite as much critique as ones that weren't, or at least many felt that."

I dwell upon the politicization of the CIA in an effort to underscore the basic proposition that all intelligence services are the toy of the government they serve. On key strategic issues, Casey and Gates routinely skewed intelligence. The degree to which this

changed the terms of public debate in Washington with respect to Afghanistan and arms control was extraordinary indeed. Consider Gorbachev's speech in February, 1986, when he talked of Afghanistan as a "bleeding wound." Post editors demanded changes in my story, which alleged that Gorbachev's remarks foreshadowed a decision to withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan – a judgment soon to be confirmed in reality. U.S. diplomats who reached this conclusion had similar experiences. The U.S. Ambassador to Moscow, Jack Matlock, described the reaction of his consumers in Washington: "There was an absolute unwillingness to accept the notion that the Russians might be willing to get out and wanted to finally negotiate. I always attributed that in part, frankly, to the stake that the CIA had in the counterinsurgency program in Afghanistan."

Robert Blackwell revealed the result of the inflated projections of Soviet military power: "Never mind that the Soviet Union never in ten years, from the late 1970s through the entire decade of the 1980s, ever lived up to the projections that were made... We projected these huge forces, then used those projections as a rationale for our spending – and they (the Soviets) never lived up to those projections."

Bill Casey died in the spring of 1987, but his ghost hovers over the CIA headquarters at Langley. He and Robert Gates, in my judgement, inflicted enormous damage on the Agency. The end of 1991 should have been, by any measure, the Agency's moment of greatest glory; instead, the CIA came under attack for having failed the mission for which it was founded. The Bush administration continued to censor dissenting views within the bureaucracy; Robert Gates was Bush's CIA director. Shortly before the collapse of the Soviet empire, Bush's vice president, Dan Quayle, publicly insisted that no real changes were taking place in Russia and referred to perestroika as "a form of Leninism."

Did the CIA fail in its mission? I don't think so. By the very nature of its mission, the Agency was unable to advertise its accomplishments. Its failures, by contrast, were widely publicized. But if you examine the sources of these failures, they were grounded more often than not in actions of political leaders.

Which brings me back to Markus Wolf's assertion that "however sharp may be the instincts of an intelligence service, it is always the toy of the government it serves." It is unlikely to expect that the behavior of politicians in the new century will change dramatically. Some things never change.

But the CIA does have the capacity to adapt itself to the new international climate. First and foremost, it must jettison its culture of secrecy, and its preoccupation with covert action. Critics argue that the constraints of security have often overwhelmed the Agency's ability to find out what is going on in the world. Even

before the onset of the information age, some of the top officials of the Reagan and Bush administrations said that they had gained sufficient information about Russia by reading the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Fritz Ermarth, a retired CIA analyst, recently published a masterful analysis of the current conditions in Russia.¹⁰ How much could he have added to the national debate on Russia over the years if he had been free to publish in scholarly journals or newspapers?

This is not a theoretical question; it is vital to the way a reasonable government should operate. The fact is that our congressional leaders and policy makers do not have time to read secret analyses, nor do they react to them the way they do to an Op-Ed article in the *Washington Post*.

Ironically, as Lars-Erik Nelson revealed recently, censorship of U.S. officials dealing with Russian affairs has grown worse since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In particular, Clinton administration support for Boris Yeltsin led to a ban on writings that might cast doubt on Yeltsin's competency and corruption.

A former CIA analyst, Robert Steele, who now runs a private intelligence firm called Open Source Solutions, has openly questioned the Agency's secrecy. In a presentation before the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, Steele proved that he could produce more usable information more quickly by using open sources and the Internet than the CIA could get from its secret sources (the presentation included satellite photographs and military battle orders).

This is not to suggest that the United States should contract its intelligence needs to Steele's firm. But this is a wake-up call. Ultimately, what is the purpose of intelligence? It is, I believe, to provide national leaders with reasonable and accurate assessments about adversaries.

NOTES

1 Houghton Mifflin, 1985.

2 *Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1991.

3 Rodman D. Griffin, *The New CIA*, CO Researcher, Dec. 1992.

4 *The New York Times*, May 19, 1991.

5 Kirsten Lundberg, *Harvard Intelligence and Policy Project*, 1994.

6 Markus Wolf, *Man without a Face*, Times Books, 1997.

7 *Know Thine Enemy*, Westview 2000.

8 *Foreign Policy*, No. 93, Winter 1993-94.

9 *Memoirs*, p. 691.

10 *The National Interest*, Spring of 1999.

