



The Sorry State of the CIA

By Reuel Marc Gerecht

George Tenet's departure from the Central Intelligence Agency provides an opportunity to properly assess and repair the agency's weaknesses, but real reform requires confronting the entrenched bureaucracy and strengthening the clandestine service in order to infiltrate and thwart terrorist organizations.

Because of Iraq and a continuing Washington blood feud over the decision to go to war, both Congress and the press are perhaps more focused on the Central Intelligence Agency than at any time since the Church committee hearings of the 1970s. The departure of George Tenet as director of central intelligence should be an occasion for taking stock, with a view to revitalizing the agency. Yet its muscle-bound bureaucratization, combined with the failure of the press to accurately represent to the public and to the rest of the government the agency's actual problems, not to mention the tenor of the current recriminations, holds out little hope that we will see the innovation needed to combat bin Ladenism on the ground: the deployment of a new cadre of operatives working inside organizations like al Qaeda. Despite Tenet's constant discussion of rebuilding the clandestine service, we are still largely stuck in the past.

When I entered the CIA in 1985, Aldrich Ames's treason and the Iran-Contra scandal were in gestation, yet headquarters in Langley, Virginia, seemed a happy place. The vast majority of officers were pleased to have William Casey as the director of central intelligence. The die-hard cold warrior had clout at the White House, which meant money from Capitol Hill and respect. The

Carter years had been, everyone inside said, a time of drift. The revolution in Iran—the CIA's utter failure to see it coming—and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—an event belatedly foreseen and poorly understood at Langley—had depressed an institution battered morally by the 1970s. It was difficult to find spooks who liked President Jimmy Carter's director, Stansfield Turner, always reproached inside the clandestine service as a prig.

Under Casey, the Directorate of Operations (DO), the official name of the clandestine service, was awash with cash and manpower. During Ronald Reagan's presidency, the CIA was not loved by the liberal establishment from which it had sprung, but neither was it as scorned as it had been under Presidents Gerald Ford and Carter. Of course, insiders had complaints. Many senior DO officers did not like Casey's love of covert action. Vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, the United States was being, for them, too provocative. For most operatives, espionage was the finest, if not the first, calling of American intelligence overseas. Some analysts in the Directorate of Intelligence (DI), which politically has usually been somewhat to the left of the Operations Directorate, thought similarly. Within the DI, there were concerns that Casey and the Reagan White House were trying to encourage analysis depicting the Soviet Union as more menacing than it really was. (Neither case officers nor analysts are as overtly political as the average American diplomat, who is more

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often than not staunchly Democratic. But they are not politically neutered creatures, tenaciously holding on to some all-American civil-servant middle ground. Case officers tend to be earthier and more politically incorrect than analysts and diplomats, but such a disposition does not necessarily produce hawkishness in foreign affairs or skepticism about the welfare state.) Politics aside, Casey's tenure seemed to most in Langley, and in the stations and bases worldwide, a good if not golden age.

Tenet and the Casey Model

It is good to remember Casey and his CIA when judging George Tenet's tenure as director of central intelligence. In their institutional affections, in their grand vision of how the CIA fits into American power and government, in the (sometimes unjust) criticisms made of them, and in their ultimate failure to build and run competent espionage organizations, the two men are quite similar. It is, of course, their failure to confront the espionage problem that is the least appreciated outside the agency. The truth is, Langley has waged clandestine-intelligence collection operations in a surreal way, whether against the Soviet empire and a miscellany of other targets during the Cold War or, most damningly of late, against Islamic holy-warrior terrorists. Accepted wisdom has already formed about Casey and Tenet's nurturing a rebirth of the clandestine service from the doldrums of their predecessors. More than any other directors since the 1950s, they certainly sought to restore the operational *joie de vivre* and glory of American intelligence.

Both men, above all else, loved the Directorate of Operations, and viewed it as the preeminent organization within the CIA, which was for them the cutting edge of the intelligence community. The eavesdroppers at the National Security Agency may receive vastly more money than Langley—and have unquestionably done more for America's national security than the clandestine service—but it is enormously hard to become excited about the highly compartmentalized, aesthetically sterile, computer-driven NSA. Indeed, Tenet's affection for the operations directorate has been more profound and sentimental than was Casey's. Casey's youthful experience in the Office of Strategic Services, the CIA's World War II predecessor, whetted an appetite for the ever-alluring possibilities and romance of intelligence collection. However, his collision with the real world of the CIA in the 1980s, with its long

able-clearance processes and case-officer caution, left the director thinking less of his beloved institution. The Iran-Contra scandal was, in part, a product of Casey's frustration with the CIA's highly bureaucratic, legalistic ethos. It is a good bet that William Casey always thought he gave more shadowy allure to Langley than Langley gave to him.

George Tenet, who grew to manhood in the bureaucracies of Congress and the executive branch, did not seem to find the agency's paper-pushing beyond repair or even particularly vexing. Tenet is a gifted Washington wonk whose identity probably has been overwhelmingly defined by the government jobs he has held. A review of Tenet's speeches since he became director of central intelligence gives the distinct impression that he, the son of poor Greek immigrants, could not believe he had actually become America's chief spook. According to folks who have known him since his days as a congressional staffer, Tenet's streetwise, common-man cockiness and use of colorful language expanded significantly when he became director. Though the emotional antithesis of the most renowned, bureaucratically agile case officer-turned-CIA director, Richard Helms, Tenet loves to be seen as the man keeping the nation's secrets and loves to suggest that the CIA actually has some amazing secrets in its possession.

And by and large, the press—especially the journalists on the intelligence beat—has translated Tenet's enthusiasm for foreign-intelligence collection, and his increased budgets and personnel for the clandestine service, as evidence that the Operations Directorate is in better shape now than at any time since the end of the Cold War. This same journalistic attitude existed in the Casey years: William Casey may have been a law-breaking rogue, but he was at least turning the clandestine service again into a serious espionage service. The crisis of 9/11 and the perceived failure of American intelligence in tracking weapons of mass destruction in Iraq have tarnished somewhat the perception that the CIA under Tenet has been on the mend. But even severe critics of Tenet's management—like the chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Republican senator Pat Roberts of Kansas—usually concede that Tenet has improved the agency's HUMINT capabilities. The evolution of the reporting by *Newsweek's* Evan Thomas, who has a serious interest in American intelligence, is a good barometer of where Tenet's reputation stands. After the war in Afghanistan, the agency under

George Tenet, according to *Newsweek*, was back! After the war in Iraq, Tenet's prognostication that it will take another five years to rebuild the CIA into an all-round first-rate institution—assuming the next director continues Tenet's new strategic plan—is too optimistic. According to Thomas, successful refurbishing will likely take a decade. To which one must ask, A decade of doing what? What is it exactly that Thomas thinks Tenet was doing right? Thomas certainly has a sensitive understanding of the agency's "halcyon" days, when the very best men did not necessarily produce the very best results. Money, manpower, focus, seriousness of purpose, a real fear of the enemy, a true unabashed, unashamed love of human intelligence collection, a "willingness to take risks"—William Casey and his CIA had all this. But in practice the good old days were mostly a myth. For the Directorate of Operations, the 1980s were years of routine operational dishonesty, whose principal source was a defective system for determining who got promoted.

Recruiting without Results

Under this system, thousands of agents were recruited abroad neither for their intelligence-reporting potential nor their operational utility. They were put on the books—case officers often referred to the sport as "collecting scalps"—because that is how CIA operatives earned promotion. With some exceptions—extraordinary handling of foreign agents could win you bonus points—the "head count" was the way to professional success. For most case officers, the Cold War was a backdrop for the constant search for an easy "developmental," somebody who could be quickly turned into a "recruitment" for the annual performance report.

Based on years of conversations with active-duty and retired case officers and the reading of operational and intelligence files going back to the 1950s, I believe the exaggeration surrounding the recruitment of agents was worse in the Casey years than it had been before (more money always fortifies a bureaucracy's bad habits), but the institutional disposition to accept "recruitments" without too much reflection, to encourage young case officers to recruit "aggressively," as if foreigners with truly valuable information were willing to commit treason in sufficient numbers to sustain a promotion system primarily based on "scalps," went back to the agency's early years. In the dark days of the Cold War, when

American officials feared major, potentially cataclysmic Soviet breakthroughs, it is understandable that the CIA, new to the game of global espionage and covert action, would more indiscriminately recruit foreign agents. And spying is often adrenaline-rich. When men are so enjoying themselves, they can easily equate the thrill of clandestine operations with their importance.

Under Casey, the Directorate of Operations simply did not admit it had a systemic problem with recruitments, a problem that had morally and operationally hollowed out the organization. Occasionally, the truth, or at least part of the truth, could be heard. A Soviet division chief would let it slip that all of our valuable Soviet agents, never many in number, were volunteers. That is, case officers had not recruited them—they had come forward to offer their services to the United States. Indeed, chasing Soviet and East European targets might even have been counterproductive. Star case officers now and then pushed their exaggeration of agent recruitment into outright, sloppy, blatant deceit. Much of the American right looks at William Casey as a Cold War hero, and there is a strong case to be made that Casey's covert-action enthusiasms, especially in the Third World and Poland, diminished the Soviet empire's will and resources. But the gentleman as an espionage boss appears to have had no idea that his organization was a wreck.

And it is essential to remember that throughout the 1980s, the press and the oversight committees of Congress also really had no idea of what was going on. Yes, Iran-Contra got everybody's attention. A former CIA officer fleeing to Moscow also could, for awhile, grab the headlines. So, too, rumors of missing or dead Russian agents. By and large, however, press reporting on the agency has not been a helpful tool in understanding the real problems in the Directorate of Operations.

It is quite striking to see how Congress, the executive branch, and the press reinforce the zeitgeist about the current state of the CIA. When senators and congressmen and their staffers on the intelligence oversight committees cite press reports about the mood inside Langley, one realizes how light the grasp often is on Capitol Hill of the spirit and mechanics of American intelligence. For if journalism is usually a significant force in American life in creating pressure for the reform of dysfunctional institutions, it is less so with regard to the intelligence community. For obvious reasons—the CIA is a secret organization, and clandestine-service

officers usually have a reflexive distaste for the press—the fourth estate is not good at keeping the heat on Langley, unless it is spoon-fed by Congress’s oversight committees or an angry rival executive-branch agency with some knowledge of CIA methods, operations, and intelligence. To be sure, journalists’ natural love of secrets inclines them to write sexy stories—Bob Woodward’s books are classics in the genre. But there is probably no harder beat in Washington. Journalists rarely have unauthorized access to the junior and mid-level case officers who do the lion’s share of the serious espionage work and are the most likely to depict accurately the strengths and weaknesses of the institution. What’s more, the penalty for writing consistently negative stories about CIA competence can be quite high for journalists, who can ill afford to lose access to officially sanctioned leaks and background briefings.

Assessing Iraqi WMD Intelligence

Now, as in the days of Iran-Contra, the CIA is front-page news. Odds are Tenet and his agency will get hammered for all the wrong reasons. The report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence published on August 9 will probably be the first salvo in a barrage against Tenet over the Iraq war intelligence. However, Tenet’s February 5, 2004, speech on Iraq and weapons of mass destruction will likely stand the test of time and prove a truer, more measured, historical document than the assessment of the Senate’s intelligence committee. It is easily Tenet’s finest speech and it is, amazingly, the only serious defense so far given by any Bush administration official against the charges of conspiracy, deceit, and incompetence surrounding the WMD issue. And once the Senate’s unclassified and classified report become public knowledge, and outsiders can properly assess the historical knowledge of the staffers and senators who wrote it, Tenet could well ask for an apology.

When you stack up the agency’s assessment of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq during the Clinton administration and under Bush, the continuity of Tenet’s positions is compelling. It is most unlikely that either he or politically ambitious CIA managers below him ginned up intelligence on Saddam Hussein’s WMD programs. (The concerted nature of this hypothetical effort conjures up a Costa Gavras film.) Historians who get their hands on the Senate’s report and

earlier Clinton-era CIA assessments—the ones that convinced the former CIA analyst and National Security Council staffer Kenneth Pollack to write an influential book arguing for war—will likely have little hesitation asserting that Vice President Dick Cheney pressured no one in the CIA to recast his views either before or after President Bush made the decision to invade. In time, when political passions cool over the Iraq war, the agency reporting on WMD will likely be seen as consistent and sober if not error free. And the influence of defectors provided by Ahmad Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress and Iyad Allawi’s Iraqi National Accord will also likely be seen to have been negligible, if not nonexistent.

Historians will probably view CIA reporting on the Iraq WMD threat as no less responsible than the agency’s analysis of the WMD threat from the former Soviet Union. That analysis certainly had its flaws, but these were the result primarily of questionable assumptions about Soviet statistics and economics and a failure to assess accurately the Soviet Union’s willingness to feed its military complex at unsustainable levels. The CIA was certainly guilty then of “group think”—a charge now hurled by the Senate committee at the Directorate of Intelligence. But the CIA is always guilty of “group think” since its reports, and especially national intelligence estimates, are designed to reflect the collective wisdom of the organization and the intelligence community. That wisdom may be flawed—unconventional, brilliant insights into countries or people almost always come from individuals working alone or in very small groups, marrying their intuition with facts. For better or worse, the American intelligence community is allergic to this kind of analysis, which it usually condemns as “subjective.” The Senate Select Committee, which has been receiving the agency’s “group think” pieces for decades, could have, perhaps, complained about this method and style earlier.

It is also absolutely true that George Tenet’s CIA failed to penetrate Saddam Hussein’s inner circle. And only penetrations at the highest political and scientific levels could have possibly given us evidence that Saddam Hussein had decided to give up his billion-dollar, decades-long quest to develop weapons of mass destruction. (And note the plural “penetrations”: against such a proficient counterespionage regime, there would have to be more than one penetration, assessed for protracted periods of time, before it would be possible to believe

that the information from these assets was not disinformation.) But it is also true that the CIA failed to penetrate Moscow's inner circle in the Cold War and that the great agents we did have (the most valuable were probably scientists) were all volunteers. The CIA was not similarly lucky with Saddam Hussein's regime, whose Orwellian grip on Iraqi society was as savage as Joseph Stalin's on the USSR. It is a very good bet that the CIA has not had a single penetration in the inner circle of any of its totalitarian adversaries. The same is probably true for the French, British, and Israeli foreign intelligence services. In other words, one simply cannot judge the caliber of a Western espionage service by its ability to penetrate the power circles of totalitarian regimes. The difficulties are just overwhelming.

Reforming the Clandestine Services

One can, however, grade intelligence services on whether they have established operational methods that would maximize the chances of success against less demanding targets—for example, against Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda, which is by definition an ecumenical organization constantly searching for holy-warrior recruits. It is by this standard that George Tenet failed and the CIA will continue to fail, assuming it maintains its current practices. But the odds are poor that the White House, Congress, and the press will condemn the agency for its failure to develop a workable strategy and tactics against the Islamic terrorist target. The politically charged Iraq war, like Iran-Contra before it, will now dominate Washington's view of the agency.

The time to start demanding meaningful reform of the agency was immediately after 9/11, when passions were high and entrenched bureaucratic habits could more easily have been overcome. It is most unlikely the 9/11 Commission will generate similar heat with its final report. The abysmal espionage apparatus that William Casey presided over was decades in the making. It was in great part structurally foreordained: not only the promotion system but also the decision to deploy the vast majority of case officers overseas under official cover—posing as U.S. diplomats, military officers, and so on—set in motion a counterproductive psychology and methods of operation that still dominate the CIA today.

The relatively young men who are poised to become the most senior officers of the clandestine service will

likely be overwhelmingly from the Near East Division, as was true through much of Casey's tenure. These men gained their professional identities in the 1980s. The odds are not good that they think it necessary to overturn the structure that promoted them.

The Directorate of Operations has very reluctantly realized that it had problems with agent recruitment and its promotion system in the past. But it has stubbornly refused to admit that these problems were systemic. Case officers who fail in the recruitment sweepstakes will simply make busywork for themselves, and this busywork will inevitably corrupt the ethos of the organization. And there is simply no way that case officers—who still today are overwhelmingly deployed overseas under official cover or, worse, at home in ever-larger task forces—can possibly meet, recruit, or neutralize the most dangerous targets in a sensible, sustainable way. With the politicization of the agency over Iraq, a helpful nuts-and-bolts discussion of operations just is not likely to happen.

Yet a concrete discussion is precisely what is needed. Successful espionage operations against al Qaeda and other Islamic terrorist organizations would be defined by the efforts of a small group of men who seed themselves into these organizations. Some, probably most, of these men would need to be actual case officers—CIA employees—not foreign agents the CIA has recruited. The complexity of the task, target, and culture demands a level and reliability of information that would come much more easily from case officers acting as jihadists. The CIA will be a serious espionage organization ready for the twenty-first century only when its professional ranks are dominated in numbers and influence by such officers, who operate far away from U.S. embassies and consulates.

The entire system for finding, training, and deploying overseas case officers of this type needs to be completely overhauled. The "farm," the legendary training ground for case officers in the woody swamps of Virginia, ought to be abandoned. It has never had much relevance to the practice of espionage overseas. It is a symbol of the agency's lack of seriousness. This new cadre needs to be a breed apart. Their operational half-life in the field might be at most ten years. It is hard to imagine them married and with kids. It is also hard to imagine their coming into being unless these jihadist moles are well paid. A starting salary of a quarter of a million dollars a year would be reasonable. Outsiders

will know such a change is afoot when there are rumors of case officers' regularly dying abroad.

This is not likely to happen, of course. Tenet, like Casey, will be damned for the wrong things. And if another 9/11 happens, we will start all over again, with more committees, investigations, recriminations, and blue-ribbon recommendations. Another director will

come, and the agency—in the press at least—will again be reborn. We can all be thankful, of course, that bin Ladenism will in the end be defeated not by the prowess of American intelligence, but by the democratization of the Middle East. Otherwise, we would be effectively defenseless against a small, tightly knit platoon of holy warriors who live to kill and die.