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## What's Wrong with the CIA?

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*The following is adapted from a lecture at a seminar entitled "The History, Purpose and Propriety of U.S. Intelligence Activities," held on the Hillsdale College campus on September 14-18, 2003.*

It's obvious that something is wrong with the CIA. The 9/11 attacks were, by definition, the worst intelligence failure in our country's history. More recently, we have had trouble locating Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and have been consumed by the flap over whether the CIA signed off on President Bush's (accurate) observation in his State of the Union speech that British intelligence believes Saddam Hussein had tried to purchase uranium ore in Niger.

In each of these cases, the CIA was asleep at the switch, not quite on the ball, or tossing a banana peel under the President's feet. In the midst of a war in which intelligence must play a central role, we need a CIA that is razor sharp and playing offense, not one that blindsides the country or embarrasses the commander-in-chief.

So what's the problem? Before answering this question, we need to acknowledge two points: First, intelligence is the riskiest, toughest business in the world. Compared with trying to project the future of world politics or discovering a country's most closely guarded secrets, day trading in the stock market is child's play and exploring for diamonds a piece of cake. In the intelligence business no one gets it right every time – or even most of the time – and it's easy to take pot-shots at honorable people who are doing their best under difficult circumstances.



The second point is that the CIA employs some of the hardest working and most decent men and women I have ever known. They are absolutely wonderful; we are lucky to have them and we owe them our gratitude.

The problem with the CIA lies within its structure and culture. It doesn't match the task, because the analytic side of intelligence is unlike any other function of government. It is unlike budget-making, diplomacy, or the setting of policy for trade or agriculture. Intelligence is like science, which means that success depends utterly on having the most brilliant people studying a problem. Only they will know how to go about finding the right answer – and how to communicate it clearly and early enough to make a difference.

As geniuses like Albert Einstein and Jonas Salk remind us, in science there is no substitute for sheer intellectual firepower – in other words, for brains. This is why scientific research institutes hire the smartest people they can find, and why they place scientists at the top who are even more brilliant to manage the team and, when necessary, to decide which of their proposed experiments to back and which to stop. That's why so many leading research institutes are headed by Nobel laureates. And it's why the big breakthroughs in science come from research institutes rather than government-operated labs.

During World War II, we had the kind of intelligence service that matched this model. It was the Office of Strategic Services. Led by a brilliant and tough-minded lawyer named William J. Donovan, the OSS was a free-wheeling collection of our country's best minds. Donovan recruited them from Wall Street, the corporate world, academia, research labs – wherever they were working. They were lawyers, administrators, financiers, economists, technicians, writers and university professors. What they had in common – besides a burning sense of patriotism – was a special kind of brilliance that you find in scientists and must have in intelligence analysts: the ability to spot a pattern with the fewest possible facts. They didn't wait until two and two were sitting on their desks to realize they had four. They could make intuitive and logical leaps quickly and figure out what the indicators meant *before* it was obvious to everyone. And they articulated their conclusions clearly enough, and early enough, to get

the policymakers moving before it was too late. To this day, intelligence experts consider the OSS to be among history's greatest and most effective intelligence services.

## How Reagan Did It

When the Cold War revved up in the late 1940s, Congress created the CIA to pick up where the OSS had left off. Indeed, in its early years the CIA was led and staffed by scores of OSS veterans. But over the years, the CIA became more like every other government agency – the Commerce Department, or the Agriculture Department or what have you. It began to hire young people who joined in hopes of making the CIA their careers. Their objective was to do well, move up through the ranks, and provide their families with a decent income, good health-care coverage and a government pension. To be sure, some truly brilliant analysts did join up. Sometimes they would become so frustrated by the CIA's culture that they would resign. Others stayed and did their heroic best in a culture that rarely appreciated their contributions and all too often blocked them from rising to positions their talents deserved.

By the time President Reagan took office in 1981, the CIA had become bureaucratic, sclerotic and woefully inadequate to its mission. The man President Reagan chose as his Director of Central Intelligence, William J. Casey, understood the problem. Indeed, during World War II, Casey had been Bill Donovan's protégé, based in London as head of secret operations for the OSS. Casey did two things to solve the problem, of which only the first has received much attention. He strived mightily to improve and reform the CIA itself, and his efforts generated more leaks, lies, smears and congressional inquiries than any of us who worked with Bill Casey care to remember.

And while all this gave the Washington establishment something juicy to blather about at their lunches and dinner parties, Casey did something else that the kibitzers failed to notice and that few people other than President Reagan understood: He created an OSS within the CIA itself. That is, he brought in a small cadre of outsiders to work with him – and whom he could protect from bureaucratic attacks – to get the job done.

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As one of those privileged to be among that cadre, let me try to give you a sense of what it was like on the inside. In doing so, please keep in mind that I am talking about the CIA during the Reagan administration, and that was quite some time ago. Nevertheless, it's clear that, in the years since President Reagan led our country, the CIA has reverted to its pre-Reagan culture. It's better now than it was before 9/11 – especially in Operations – but still it falls short of where it needs to be. And again I remind you, to repeat, that the CIA then and now includes many fine people – and a few who are just outstanding. It's the culture in which they work that's the problem, and which I am trying to describe.

The most striking feature of the CIA's analytic culture was its blandness. The secrets were fascinating, of course, but intellectually it was a boring place to work. Most of the analysts simply weren't as well read as they should have been. For instance, they seemed not to have read much more in history than most college graduates. That may be accept-

able for people elsewhere in the government, but *not* for people on whom the president relies to know what is really going on in the world and to predict the future soon enough so that he can change that future before it happens. They read the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *Time* or *Newsweek*, perhaps *U.S. News & World Report*, and occasionally the *Economist*. I rarely met anyone who read *Commentary*, *National Review*, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, or any other cutting-edge publication where the world's leading thinkers expound their ideas and perceptions about the world. The CIA's analysts thought that the secret information to which they alone had access made all of that “open-source” insight unimportant.

In addition, the analysts weren't as well-connected as they ought to have been. Because they had spent most, if not all, of their careers at the agency (and, in fairness, because of the agency's stringent rules about talking with outsiders), they hadn't had the opportunity to meet and get to know people who were forging high-powered careers in

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business, in the investment community and in politics. As a result, the analysts were cut off from some of the world's smartest people, from the ideas these people were bringing into the commercial and intellectual market-places and, perhaps more importantly, from the *information* about the world these people were picking up along the way. The CIA's analysts worked hard – very hard, actually – but all too often they just didn't have the knowledge or the intellectual firepower you would find at our country's leading think tanks or university faculties.

## Connecting the Dots

Getting CIA analysts to “connect the dots” was sometimes excruciating. One now-famous incident involved a National Intelligence Estimate regarding state-sponsored terrorism. The question was whether the Soviet Union was itself involved. The analysts insisted it was not.

“But look,” I said. “We know there are terrorist training camps in Soviet-bloc countries – we have pictures of them. It just isn't possible those governments are unaware of these camps. And we know these governments don't so much as buy a box of paper clips without Moscow's approval. So the Soviet Union *must* know about these camps, and if they know about them and allow them to operate, that means the Soviet Union is involved.”

The analysts responded with the classic CIA reply: “We have no evidence of that.” They wouldn't concede that it was the *logic* of the situation that comprised the evidence, rather than some purloined document from the safe in Leonid Brezhnev's office. One reason they wouldn't concede the point is that they simply didn't grasp it. Another reason – and I'm dragging my heels as I say this, because it's impressionistic rather than provable, but it simply must be said to understand the problem – is that they didn't *want* to see it.

To put this as bluntly as possible, when I was there, most career CIA analysts – like their Civil Service counterparts in agencies throughout the government – weren't Reagan supporters. They didn't like the President, and they thought his policies were misguided or even downright nuts. So they didn't want to give him any ammunition he could use to

make his case and drive his policies forward. I am not suggesting that the analysts withheld supporting evidence on purpose. Rather, I am suggesting that they are human beings like the rest of us, and it is human nature not to go out of your way to help someone accomplish a goal you believe is wrong or dangerous.

Sometimes we were able to convince the analysts to modify the final product. Other times we were able to bludgeon them into making the changes we wanted – although these episodes had a nasty habit of turning up in the next day's edition of the *Washington Post*. Then, before lunch, Casey would find himself hauled before some congressional committee and shredded by Senators or Representatives – mostly, but not always, Democrats – who professed to be outraged that a bunch of right-wing extremist crazies were “interfering with the intelligence professionals,” or pressuring them to change their judgments to support the president's policies.

When convincing and bludgeoning failed, our last resort was to go two ways at once: Casey would permit the analysts to say whatever they wanted in their report or estimate. Then, very quietly and often with no paper-trail to be found later, he would authorize one or another member of his inner circle – the OSS he had built within the CIA – to produce an alternate memo that reflected their, and his own, judgment. He would allow the official report to be published and distributed, so no one could accuse him of “interfering with the intelligence professionals.” But he would put a few copies of the unofficial memo in his briefcase and head down to the White House to hand them out personally to President Reagan and other key members of the administration, all the while suggesting – with Bill's version of a wink and a nod – that when they had finished reading the official CIA version, they take a moment to read this, too. It wasn't elegant or pretty. But it was legal (really, it was) and it reduced the chances of President Reagan being blindsided by a CIA whose career analysts weren't as good as they should have been, or embarrassed by a bureaucracy that disliked him and his policies and just plain hated to give him any ammunition.

President Bush deserves no less. He needs a CIA that is razor sharp, playing offense and

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led by people who support him and his policies. Alas, he doesn't have that. For instance, the incumbent Director of Central Intelligence, George Tenet, is a Clinton Administration holdover. Of course, the War on Terrorism is different from the Cold War. And today, unlike in the Reagan years, the president's party controls both houses of Congress. So, the Reagan/Casey solution of creating an OSS within the CIA may not be the right way to go. But it's the idea of finding some way to jump-start the Agency that remains valid, indeed vital. The good news for President Bush is that our country is fairly teeming with talented men and women from all walks of life who want to help fight and win the War on Terrorism, and who

would make superb intelligence officers. It's up to the President to figure out how best to harness all of this talent and make today's CIA the sharpest, most effective intelligence service the world has ever known.



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