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The CIA and National Security

Admiral Stansfield Turner, US Navy (Retired)

I cannot stand behind the podium in Spruance Hall without recalling that it may well have been from behind this podium that my naval career came to an end. It came to an end because in 1974 I invited a Naval Academy classmate of mine, the then-Governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter, to come to the War College and address the student body. The reason I say this may have been the beginning of the end is that while Jimmy Carter and I were not close friends, two and a half years later President Carter, I am told, remembered me.

I was on duty in Naples, Italy when I received a phone call that said, "The President of the United States wants to see you tomorrow." With that I called in my four closest advisors, three Navy commanders and an Army lieutenant general. As preparations were made for the trip. I said, "What do I think about while going across the Atlantic? What is the President going to talk to me about or ask me to do?" We went over a lot of possibilities and in the middle of it I said, "What about the CIA—I read two weeks ago that the President's original nominee for the position withdrew after the Senate objected to him."

We discussed very briefly the possibility that I might go to the CIA, but the discussion terminated when the lieutenant general said, "Stan, the President is your classmate and friend. He wouldn't do that to you."

Well, the next morning he did. When I walked out of the Oval Office—not much more than 24 hours from the time I had been alerted—I knew that 31 and a half years of a naval career were behind me. I was in a new career as chief of the spies.

Initially I found it really was not very different from my past work, as the CIA has many military characteristics. The people are very dedicated. You need not be concerned about calling them in at midnight on a Saturday. The organization is very operationally oriented and I have as much pride in the

The Admiral Raymond A. Spruance lecture delivered at the Naval War College.

Admiral Turner is the former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency and past president of the Naval War College.

secret operational accomplishments with the CIA as I have in the military operational accomplishment in which I have participated. The CIA has very high standards of professionalism and high quality people, so in these respects, I felt quite at home.

It was not very long, however, before I began to appreciate that the CIA was also different, quite different from the military or from any other element of our Government. It is unique in three ways. First, it operates outside the normal process of our democratic governmental system. Secondly, it is not really one CIA but essentially three semi-autonomous agencies in one. Thirdly, it is—as it should be—more independent of higher authority in the Government than any other agency.

The CIA has to be an exception in our normal democratic process. Our Government is run on the principle that the citizens are the ultimate authority of what the Government will and will not do. Citizens, though, simply cannot be privileged to see enough of what the CIA is doing to exercise that ultimate control through the Congress and through their President. But this is the price that we must pay for the secrecy that is so essential in the operation of a professional intelligence service.

Secrecy in the CIA, though, is different from that in the military. In the CIA, secrecy shrouds the very core, the essence of the activity of the agency. In the military, it is really something on the periphery—the characteristics of our weapons, contingency plans, etc.—not the basic nature of the business. The citizen does know how the Defense Department intends to defend our country; he does not know what the CIA is doing to protect the nation. Thus, from its founding in 1947, the CIA was implicitly given authority to operate outside the normal checks and balances of our governmental process which cannot operate without an informed citizenry. Such exemption from prevailing rules is fundamentally an unsound situation. Unaccountable power is subject to misuse. Planners and operators will be less careful and thorough when there is no third party scrutiny. Unfortunately, the record shows that the CIA has made some mistakes and paid a price for being less than thorough.

There were also some ill-advised intelligence efforts that were fruitless—the Bay of Pigs, the opening of US mails, and the administering of drugs to unwitting Americans. When actions like these were uncovered in the intelligence investigations of 1975, the country decided to set up a series of oversight and control procedures for intelligence. In effect, we established surrogates for the citizens as the ultimate control. The surrogates for the public are the Congress with its oversight committees and the National Security Council (NSC).

Oversight was a revolution for the intelligence professionals and was difficult to accept. Nevertheless, I believe that it has worked well and that it

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has achieved two objectives for our country. First, it has reduced possible abuse of this special trust of being allowed to operate with less control and supervision than any other element of Government. For instance, it is less likely today that someone in the CIA may, on his own initiative, undertake some ill-considered operation without the Director's approval. To begin with, it is understood that he would be disobeying an explicit presidential order to clear sensitive operations with the NSC. Besides, he is aware that he might have to testify under oath before Congress about what he had done. He would be in an unhealthy position of having to disclose to the Congress what he might have withheld deliberately from his Director.

The second objective that oversight has achieved is that it forces the CIA to do a better job in its planning. This can make our intelligence more effective. I found, for instance, that when proposals came to me for risky, secret operations, they were better conceived when the staff believed that I was going to have to sell them to the NSC. I too did a better job and insisted on thorough staff preparation because I knew the project was going to be thoroughly examined. Thus, there are benefits to the quality of our intelligence employing an oversight process.

Some of the staunchest supporters of intelligence neither understand nor appreciate this. They have given attention only to the fact that oversight can lead to leaks, though I do not believe this is a serious problem. Some of these supporters are in favor of relaxing all controls, unleashing the CIA, and returning to "the good old days." For instance, when the Reagan administration came into office, they tried to weaken the presidential executive order on intelligence written originally by President Ford and strengthened somewhat by President Carter. The changes proposed were so substantial that even Senator Barry Goldwater, a marvelous man, a strong supporter of intelligence and hardly a flaming liberal, objected to these changes. The end result was that the Administration loosened controls on the periphery, on the fringes, which was quite unnecessary.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are still some civil libertarians who would like to tighten those controls even more. Fortunately they are quiescent for the moment but there is, I believe, a deep, latent distrust of the CIA among a significant number in our society. Such distrust could erupt at the least excuse and I happen to believe that another round of intense public criticism of the CIA could be fatal for the agency and a disaster for the country.

It is time to abandon these extreme attitudes. The one side needs to recognize that we do have oversight, that it is effective, though it will never be 100 percent insurance against excesses or mistakes. The other side must recognize that oversight is a strength to intelligence, not just a risk to secrecy. Too little oversight could risk recurrence of improper or illegal actions, and that in turn could unleash that latent distrust on the left.

Unfortunately, the second unique characteristic of the CIA leaves it less well prepared to avoid errors of the past or to produce the best intelligence. This characteristic is that the organization is composed of three agencies. But why? The reason being that incompatibilities exist in the five basic functions assigned to the CIA: spying (or human intelligence); technical collection such as photographs or electronic eavesdropping; analysis or an interpretation of this collected information; counterintelligence overseas, and covert action.

The first three of these—spying, technical collection, and analysis—are the basic functions of intelligence and are easily perceived as being incompatible. Spying demands great secrecy. You've got to protect the identity of your agents. Secrecy has historically led to abuse and has generated the demand for oversight. Analysis, on the other hand, involves very little risk and there is little need for oversight. Some secrecy is necessary, of course, but it also needs a great deal of openness. The analysts must be able to interact with people in the academic world, the business community, and the public in order to avoid a self-centered and very over-confident attitude toward their analyses.

The technical collection people come out somewhere in between. They need secrecy for their inanimate inventions, their devices. They also need some oversight because these technical devices can intrude into the lives of Americans improperly. So the needs and the outlook of the technical collection people are similar to those of the spies and the analysts but they are not coincident with either.

It is because of these differing methodologies that these three operating departments of the CIA have, for over the past 30 some years, developed an intense desire to protect their special interests. They have built a vast network of bureaucratic rules to protect their independence from each other and their independence from the director of the CIA lest he adjudicate among them. They prefer to take their chances on compromising their differences rather than having them adjudicated in favor of one or the other. They are accustomed to having a director who manages the external relations of the agency with the Congress, the President and the public, but who leaves the management of the CIA to the three department heads. This, it seemed to me, was an unworkable and unwise arrangement—to have decentralized and divided authority, particularly when we were in a new era of oversight.

The CIA needs well-coordinated planning to insure that its resources are being used to the country's best advantage and not just to the advantage of these departments. Spies must dovetail with the technical collectors and both must be sure they are collecting what the analysts need to interpret. If they do not have this kind of planning, the Congress—which under oversight does

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review the CIA's budget very carefully—will not give them the resources they need.

The CIA also needs to insure that these three departments are not so independent that only they decide whether their actions are within the bounds of propriety and legality. To correct this situation, I brought into the CIA an excellent administrator as the Deputy Director, Ambassador Frank Carlucci, later to be the Deputy Secretary of Defense. We attempted to establish sufficient centralized controls and planning mechanisms to give us the assurances we felt we needed. We made a lot of progress, but the bureaucrats resisted strongly, not out of willfulness or spite, but out of a conviction that good intelligence demands decentralization.

As hard as I have searched, I cannot find evidence to support decentralization. I cannot find proof that wild schemes of the past hatched under inadequate supervision, had actually produced significant intelligence. What I did find was that the secrecy of spying engenders a mystique, a mystique that misleads people into believing that you can only spy if you are totally unsupervised. This simply is not so.

Some future director of the CIA will have to complete this transition to one agency instead of three if the CIA is to achieve full effectiveness. It is important to our national security interests that this be done because the CIA is the cornerstone of United States intelligence operations. I say the cornerstone because the CIA is the only element of our intelligence community which is not associated with a policy-making department of our Government.

Our intelligence community is made up of intelligence components in a number of different departments of Government. There is the Bureau of Intelligence and Research in the State Department, an intelligence element in the FBI, and the Department of Defense has its Defense Intelligence Agency, the DIA. In addition there are the four military intelligence organizations, the National Security Agency, and the departments of Treasury and Energy also have intelligence operations. Note, however, that all of the parents of the intelligence organizations listed here are very much a part of the policy and decision-making process in our Government. That raises problems. The very worst kind of intelligence is that in which the policy-maker is told only what he wants to hear. There is a strong ethic in American intelligence that even those intelligence organizations, which are a part of a policy-making department, must stand tall. They must be willing to tell it like it is even if they cannot support their department's policies. That makes nice theory, but the practical side is another matter.

One method used to buttress that ethic and reduce bias in our intelligence is to have competition in analysis or interpretation of the intelligence

information. We never want only one agency to do all the interpretation on a given topic, lest it be influenced by its policy-makers. For instance if we are going to study a political issue, some political trend in the world, the lead will probably be done by the State Department. The CIA and the DIA can also make useful political inputs. The CIA is considered to have the greatest strength in the economic area. The State Department does respectable economic work and, of course, the Treasury Department would participate. If it is a military subject, the DIA will take the lead normally, but the CIA could play a very important role as well.

There are several weaknesses in this system of back-up intelligence analysis. The first is that the State Department, while it does excellent intelligence work and is very seldom influenced by policy considerations, is such a small intelligence operation that it cannot do justice to everything that it undertakes. However, the major weakness of this back-up system is the inability of military intelligence to provide truly competitive analysis. There are two reasons for this. One is a lack of capability and the other is an inability to divorce themselves from policy. The lack of capability goes back to the origins of the DIA. Mr. McNamara simply drew people from the service intelligence organizations and put them in the DIA. There were many exceptions but, in general, the services did not give up their best people and much of that attitude prevails today. Given a choice, a service military intelligence officer would prefer to be assigned to his basic service intelligence organization than to the DIA because it is more career-enhancing. In fact, as long as we have four separate service intelligence organizations, we are not going to have a really solid DIA. Parenthetically, I happen to think we do not need four service intelligence organizations—at least above the tactical level.

The problem of conflicts between defense intelligence and policy influence is an even more serious issue than that of the competence of the DIA. The ethic of intelligence is independence from policy. However, the ethic of the military profession is responsiveness to command. The commander is right, once he has made up his mind and enunciated his decision. Supporting him is a must if we are to avoid chaos on the battlefield. Thus, the intelligence officer who tries to buck the system with unpopular conclusions is often looked on poorly within a military environment. Whether deliberately or not, the military hierarchy can impose enormous pressures to conform. For example, every year the intelligence community produces a number of national intelligence estimates. These are studies or interpretations of one or several major issues facing the country. They are the product of the entire intelligence community. Of course, with that many participants there is seldom total agreement. So when we come to a big issue, we have to find ways to present the disagreements—this is the essence of having competitive analysis.

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If you put too much emphasis on the dissenting views, you end up confusing the policy-maker who reads the study. If you put in too few dissents, maybe you have overlooked that one view which really is important. I felt that it was important to put in as many views in these estimates as could explain exactly why they disagreed with the majority view. Thus, the decision-maker could clearly see the contrast in the reasoning between the different outlooks.

The biggest problem I experienced in doing this was that I could seldom get the Defense Intelligence Agency to produce a meaningful explanation of its position. They believed what they believed and they believed it very strongly, but they could not give reasons for it. Sometimes it was because of a lack of competence, sometimes it was the result of pressures against saying anything that could endanger some military policy, or endanger some military program that was up for consideration by Congress. Unfortunately, what this means is that US military estimates are built on CIA analysis much more than they should be. The DIA should be our best source of military analysis. The good, professional officer who seeks unbiased intelligence today should appreciate the benefits of using the CIA as a foil by calling on them for a second opinion.

Why is it important that you and I, as citizens, understand these three points of uniqueness about the CIA? I think it should be obvious to all of us that intelligence is of growing importance to our security and to the foreign policy in this country. For instance, for well over a decade we have been engaged in serious arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union. We have superb intelligence systems that can peer into the Soviet Union and check on whether they are fulfilling the obligations of the treaty. Also, for 38 years we have lived with a delicate balance of nuclear terror between us and the Soviet Union. Yet, we have somehow found it tolerable because we are sufficiently confident of our intelligence system not to worry that we could suddenly find ourselves at a great disadvantage.

If the United States is going to continue to benefit from reliable intelligence, it needs a more sophisticated approach to manage our overall intelligence system. Attitudes of the American public swing from one extreme to the other, from drumbeat condemnation of the CIA, to not being able to do enough for the boys in the spy cloaks. Neither is a sensible attitude as it demonstrates a failure to understand the nature of the responsibilities that we have placed on the intelligence professionals in the CIA. First we ask them to operate largely outside the checks and balances of our governmental system—this permits them unusual freedom and subjects them to temptations not prevalent in any other Government agency. Next, we assign them five intelligence functions, each of which drives them to react in a somewhat different manner. Third, we make the CIA the cornerstone of our intelligence activity, expecting it not only to carry out much of the production of intelligence but also to keep the entire system honest—to free it from improper influence by policy-makers.

In my view, the professionals of the Central Intelligence Agency deserve

great credit for having done as well as they have since its inception in 1947. We have been the beneficiaries of their dedication and hard labor. But after giving the CIA that deserved credit, I want to add that we must also recognize that these three hazards of doing intelligence in the American way will continue to exist to one extent or another into the indefinite future. If eternal vigilance is the motto of the US Navy, something akin to that should be our approach to American intelligence—not because we should mistrust the CIA or its people, but because we should recognize that we have given them an exceptional challenge to meet. We should each want very much that they continue to meet that challenge every bit as well in the future as in the past.



“For a long era, happily past, our Navy had a cult of prejudice against the student officer. The academician was supposed to be irreconcilable with the well qualified seaman-fighter. The latter needed to be rather ‘rough and ready’ and above all practical, and these qualities were assumed to preclude intellectuality. The career of Jones will belie these theories. He bowed to none in seamanship, whether in gale, battle, or normal circumstances, and as a fighter was peerless—yet was an indefatigable student. In interludes between stirring events, he devoured all professional and many other books available to him—frequently by midnight oil or candle after a hard day’s work.

“Moreover Jones constantly sought opportunities for professional study through observation. He was not content to be proficient merely as a single ship commander. He tried earnestly to acquire knowledge of fleet tactics and practices through experience as an observer in active fleet operations.”

From a book review by Captain Dudley W. Knox, USN (Retired) of Lincoln Lorenz’s *John Paul Jones: Fighting for Freedom and Glory*, US Naval Institute, 1943.

