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ON PAGE A9

THE WASHINGTON STAR (GREEN LINE)
15 January 1981

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Mr. Casey's Testimony And the Rise of the CIA

If you were looking for signs of the times, the place to be was the confirmation hearing of William V. Casey, the Reagan campaign chairman chosen by the president-elect to be director of the CIA.

Casey could hardly be suspected of being squishy soft on intelligence — he goes back to the days of Will Bill Donovan and the OSS and was the first one to use the term "rogue elephant," the term used by the former chairman of the Intelligence Committee, Frank Church of Idaho, who has been replaced by Barry Goldwater, who loves the CIA only a shade less than the Pentagon.

Casey, who came on during the campaign as a rather bumbling and benevolent, was obviously prepared for defensive action. But so solicitous were the members that he found himself suggesting that CIA detractors were not necessarily disloyal or irrational.

Senatorial Abjectness

The high point of abjectness came from a Democrat, Joseph Biden, who pleaded with the nominee to give the Intelligence Committee "a report card" on its secret-keeping capability.

Casey was plainly taken aback. He pushed up his sliding spectacles, harrumphed a bit, and began a bemused reply. "I thought I would let this committee investigate me before I investigated it," he said in his gravelly, Manhattan accent. The members had the grace to chuckle a bit.

But Biden pressed on.

"There is a raging debate," he explained earnestly, his face almost aquiver with apprehension from the man he was supposed to judge, "whether this committee should have access to certain information."

Casey, recovering from astonishment, gave avuncular reassurance.

"I don't know of any significant transgression on the part of this committee," he said. Biden's face was illuminated with relief.

Sen. Malcolm Wallop, R., Wyo., growled about Americans who "somehow or another" regard the CIA as "an anathema in a free society."

Casey, who had doubtless spent hours preparing rationalizations for "the company's" excesses in the bad old days of drug-experiments, poison-plots and assassination efforts, came to the rescue of critics. "I think there is a reason," he said, and must have been surprised to hear himself saying it. "There was a time when America had high respect for the value of intelligence . . .

But it was modified by charges that the CIA had become a rogue elephant and you had to focus on reining it in."

If he had not said it, you might almost have thought that the hulloaloo of 1975 — which even Gerald Ford was forced to heed — had been entirely the work of Kremlin agents.

"I think a good job has been done on that," Casey observed cautiously of the rehabilitation. It was a world-class understatement: The rogue elephant has become a splendid mastiff, guarding us against Soviet wolves.

Nobody came out and asked Casey point-blank if he thought the requirements for "timely reporting" to Congressional committees on covert activity were intolerable. If he had, there might have been a stampede to repeal them.

Casey, who, in his formal opening statement, had included a chaste reference to "a period of turmoil," kept his head. Invited to rail against post-revelation prohibitions, such as a ban on the hire of reporters and clergymen as part-time spooks, he only said he would "adhere to the procedures" while studying "how they work."

Helms and Allende

He was far more restrained than another Reagan nominee, Alexander Haig, who was also undergoing confirmation.

Sen. Jesse Helms, R., N.C., the right-wing zealot, who became Haig's principal sponsor on Capitol Hill, insisting at the height of the firestorm over the appointment that Reagan hang in, casually introduced a whole new version of the overthrow of Salvador Allende, the Marxist president of Chile — the blackest mark against the agency in the world view.

It was the women of Chile, he drawled, enraged over the introduction of Marxist agents and Marxism in the schools, "who demanded the overthrow of Allende."

Haig, who always knows which side his bread is buttered on, agreed.

When Sen. Paul Tsongas, D., Mass., asked Haig about his cavalier dismissal of CIA complicity, the general put him down.

In Brussels, where he was NATO commander, he had had a conversation with a Chilean woman. "It was moving," he told Tsongas wittingly.

The next day he boldly spoke of restrictions on covert activity as "self-defeating and unnecessary." Say hello to covert operation, say goodbye to human rights in foreign policy. The CIA won the election, too, apparently.