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Hostages, Hindsig[illegible] & Life in the CIA

A Conversation with Stansfield Turner

by Garry Boulard

As snow fell in Washington that brisk Sunday morning in January 1981, Stansfield Turner, then head of the Central Intelligence Agency, sensed the mounting pressure and excitement as he and his wife neared the White House.

"I knew there really wasn't any reason for me to be there," the fifty-eight-year-old Carter appointee recalled. "There wasn't anything for me to do, but I just felt like I should be with the people I had worked with all those months in one of their most important hours."

An official White House photo released later in the day captured the drama of the moment: Turner, still in his overcoat, sits in a corner of the Oval Office, while such one-time heavyweights as Walter Mondale, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Ed Muskie, and G. William Miller await the latest word on the release of Iran's U.S. hostages—an ordeal that had plagued so many political careers.

In the middle of the photo stands the man who in two days would no longer be this country's commander-in-chief. Somewhat beleaguered, almost certainly tired, President Jimmy Carter appeared to be lost in thought.

Despite the high drama of the situation, Turner remembered a few funny and even emotional incidents that occurred before the hostages were released and Ronald Reagan was sworn in as the next president. "We were, for the most part, just sitting around, hoping for some new breakthrough, trying to remain calm. We'd all go into another room for coffee and to chat, then the phone would ring, and we'd all run back into the Oval Office. It got to be a little ridiculous after a while."

Even as Carter's final hours as president dwindled, he continued to perform some of the ceremonial functions required of that high office. Turner was slated to receive the National Security Medal for his almost four years as chief of the ever-controversial CIA.

"I left a message with the White House that they didn't have to go through with the ceremony. I knew the president was tired and I thought they could just mail the medal to me," said Turner. But Carter was adamant. He wanted to personally thank the CIA director for his service to the country. For Turner, a man not given to sentimental display, the gesture was heartfelt.

In New Orleans this summer to address the Tulane Founder's Society, Turner, a devotee of twelve-hour workdays who seems to gain energy as the day wears on, held an hour-long press conference, appeared on a local television show, hobnobbed with local officials, and in between it all raced back to his hotel room to make several business calls to New York.

A graduate of Annapolis, where he ranked ahead of classmate Carter in 1946, Turner also graduated from Oxford University before assuming a variety of naval duties ranging from commanding a minesweeper to running a guided missile frigate.

After twenty years of naval service, he was promoted to rear admiral in 1970 and later became commander of the Second Fleet in the Atlantic. He became known as something of an innovator in that position and made a practice of checking up on the readiness of his ships by making surprise helicopter visits.

When Carter tapped Turner to head the CIA in 1977, that agency had just gone through one of the most difficult periods of its thirty-five-year history. A congressional investigating committee headed by former senior Democratic senator Frank Church of Idaho had recommended sharp controls over what it viewed as the CIA's rampant abuse of the privacy of American citizens and the covert action taken against governments such as those of Cuba and Chile, where certain political movements thought to be anti-American were ruthlessly squelched or attacked.

One result of that congressional recommendation was the 1974 Hughes-Ryan Amendment, which stipulated that before the CIA undertook any operation which would involve it in the business of a foreign country, the president of the United States would have to justify that activity as essential to the security of this nation and then officially inform various congressional committees.

Such balance-of-power juggling acts would later prompt Carter to complain that every time he wanted to conduct any sort of covert action, he was obligated to inform seven or eight congressional committees.

Presently lecturing across the country and appearing on NBC as a military correspondent, the graying, physically fit Turner refutes George Bernard Shaw's description of top-level government officials as "people who have no souls, and are born stale."

On the contrary, in a wide-ranging conversation with *Tulanian*, Turner proved that he's not afraid to express his opinion, whether the subject is the press ("Most reporters are looking for that big Watergate-like story and if they don't find it they'll practically make one up") or the present foreign policy of the Reagan Administration ("It has been primarily one of poor planning and mixed signals.")

Tulanian: The battle for the Falkland Islands seems to be, for the time being anyway, settled. Were there any lessons for us to learn from this struggle?

Turner: There were a lot of them. First and foremost: don't get involved in a war when you don't have a vital interest involved.

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