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SECRET SUCCESS

Ex-spy mustering hi-tech forces

By WILLIAM H. INMAN

Austin, Tex. (UPI)—Bobby Ray Inman has swapped cloak and dagger for a businessman's mufti, classified secrets for proprietary ones, but the master spymaster is still outfoxing his competition.

The former CIA deputy director and chief of the ultrasecret National Security Agency heads what has been called one of the nation's great business experiments—an attempt by rival American companies to join forces and beat the Japanese at inventing the next generation of computers.

"Our success or failure here," he predicted of the hybridized outfit, Microelectronics and Computer Technology Corp., "will affect the long-term security of the United States and its

economic viability."

INMAN, 54, is no tyro when it comes to high tech. A self-styled technologist, he created electronic espionage networks for the Navy, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the CIA and the NSA, an agency so secretive few gov-

ernment leaders knew its function: to crack enemy codes, monitor foreign communications and shield U.S. secret transmissions.

But Inman no longer pursues that "ungentlemanly task of looking into other people's mail"—his words, paraphrasing a former secretary of state.

Instead, he's trying to create "an atmosphere of genius," a research work place conducive to brilliance, a place where the secrets of thinking machines can be unlocked—a daunting challenge even for an accomplished codebreaker.

BUT THE MCC experiment appears to be working, despite the long odds. Business leaders in other fields have contacted him about setting up similar joint research projects to meet the growing competition from abroad.

"One thing we have proven indisputably," said the soft-spoken admiral, sounding more like an introspective professor than a spy of three decades, "is that this is the way to meet the competition, a collaborative research effort. We have already made great headway on our projects and have

completed hiring our staff.

"We still have a long way to go before we see results. But we know now this was the way to do the job."

The first months at MCC were simply a battle of survival. Many corporate leaders felt the project was foredoomed because of a fundamental obstacle: The corporation was at odds with the Sherman Anti-Trust Act.

Already, the Justice Department was threatening to close down the project.

But nobody had counted on Inman's galvanizing presence. He and his proxies argued persuasively in the right corners of Washington. The competition was just too strong and unique, they argued. At stake was eminence in world technology. The winner will take all. The Japanese had a head start. An exception to an "archaic" rule had to be made.

IN AN extraordinary move, the Justice Department made an exception. In December 1982, it announced it did not object to the existence of a coalition of American business giants, a turnabout in the policy held since the trust-busting days of Teddy Roosevelt. Even so, the agency reserved the right to review the corporation's major programs for possible violations.

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"We got the amber light," Inman later joked. But antitrust fears scared away IBM, Texas Instruments, and AT&T with its prestigious Bell

Laboratories. Their conspicuous absence, in fact, served as Inman's "security blanket" against further Justice Department intrusion.

"AMERICA'S antitrust laws of 1890 and 1910 shaped business attitudes in this country," he said. "But times change."

Today, the battle for high-tech supremacy is fought in a worldwide arena. MCC's inspiration and impetus, in fact, came from Japan's government-subsidized Institute for New Generation Computer Technology.

Western Europeans also are working on a similar concept.

Thus, MCC was a "shotgun" affair, an unnatural wedding of domestic rivals—Lockheed, Boeing, Sperry, RCA, Honeywell, Harris and others—concerned for their future in a rapidly evolving market.

"Right now, MCC is a U.S.-only corporation," he noted. "However, with success, we may see some change in that, a willingness to license foreigners. We cannot operate in a Fortress USA format."

In MCC's case, shareholders plan to create the basic technology of the future—a fifth generation of computers—retaining ownership of all intellectual property and patents. MCC employees must sign proprietary agreements protecting the integrity of the research. A major security fear: trusted employees with itchy palms.

"The motive today is cash, cash only," he said. "In industrial and military espionage of the 1930s and 1940s, ideology was the key. In the 1970s and 80s, it's the money."

"In companies in which there is a strong sense of ethics, enforced by its own employers, there is less likelihood of workers stealing secrets. It's a question of ethics. Peer pressure also plays a big role."



Bobby Ray Inman: from trench coat to gray flannel.

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