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Thinking Things Over

—By Vermont Royster—

The Role of the CIA

One among the many tragic things about that "day of infamy," which marks another anniversary next week, is that all the information that would have prevented the surprise at Pearl Harbor was available—somewhere. It was just scattered everywhere—a bit here and a bit there, none of it pulled together in any form useful to those responsible for the nation's defense.

Out of that bitter experience and other early lessons learned in World War II came our effort to gather and organize in a systematic way information about the capabilities and intentions of nations with which we were at war. That was the euphemistically named Office of Strategic Services. It was so successful that after the war the need was recognized for a more permanent organization. The result was the Central Intelligence Agency.

One consequence of its history was that the CIA developed a split personality. Because the OSS was not only a spying agency but also perforce got involved in trying to disrupt the Axis war effort, both of which jobs it did well, the CIA grew up as a two-headed animal, one head for the gathering of information, the other for carrying out what are now called "covert operations."

It's that dual function that has kept the CIA in hot water from the early days until the latest controversy over that guerrilla-warfare manual that can be read as condoning political assassinations.

That controversy may pass, but the dual function of the CIA makes others almost inevitable.

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For one reason, "covert" operations are difficult to keep hidden, despite the name; the more successful they are, the greater the difficulty. By their very nature, involving intervention in the affairs of nations with which we are not at war, they are bound to raise issues of ethics and propriety.

But no one ought to question the duty of those responsible for our defense to know the intent and capabilities of any who may wish us ill. The CIA's information-gathering function has ancient roots.

In the Old Testament it's written how the Lord advised Moses to send agents "to spy out" the land of Canaan, which was just as well, since they found its cities to be well walled and the people strong. By 400 B.C., halfway around the world in China, Sun Tzu had compiled the first "how to" book of intelligence gathering.

From then on through World War II wise statesmen understood the importance of intelligence. Bismarck conceived the idea of a single intelligence agency as Germany's eyes to the outside world. He understood this meant more than spies in high places; it meant understanding the mood in other countries of ordinary people such as farmers or storekeepers, for their mood, too, measures a nation's strength.

Unfortunately not all statesmen are wise. In 1914 it was an unnecessary miscalculation of German military strength by the French and, ironically, a distrust by the Germans of the information available to those heirs of Bismarck that let Europe stumble into World War I.

Even more unfortunately, our own country learned nothing from that experience. Our intelligence services were split among the Army, Navy and the State Department. They received little money or attention. Our attitude toward code-breaking was for long summed up by Secretary of State Stimson's reported remark that "gentlemen don't read each other's mail."

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In that attitude lay the seeds of Pearl Harbor. Even after the formation of the OSS the leadership, military and political, didn't always profit from the available intelligence. After World War II it was a long time before we recognized that our one-time ally, the Soviet Union, was one of those that wished us ill.

I've no idea how efficient the present CIA's information-gathering operation is, nor am I likely to learn until someday there is a spectacular success or failure. But I can't help being made uneasy by its divided function. For that means that both the money spent on that elaborate agency in Virginia and its attention to its two functions are divided. Not only the agency's chief but its many "station agents" in far-off places have their minds split between the two. That does not strike me as the most effective way to perform either.

What troubles me is not the dedication of those within the agency. It's the distraction of their efforts due to the two jobs we have given it to do, jobs which are not always compatible one with the other.

As a matter of fact, when the CIA was formed in 1947 its intelligence duties (including counterintelligence) were clearly spelled out. Its role in covert operations in other countries is an accretion laid upon it by successive administrations concerned with trouble spots from Laos and the Congo to Vietnam and Nicaragua.

There are then, it seems to me, two questions about the CIA. One is whether our best interests are served by any covert efforts to disrupt the affairs of unfriendly nations with which we are not at war. My own feeling, for whatever it's worth, is that as long as the world has such a wild and frightful hue, we can hardly avoid it.

But of the need for good intelligence about the world around us, hostile or otherwise, I've no doubt at all. And we should take care lest in mixing the two functions in one agency, with all the attendant controversy, the public someday cries "enough" and throws out the baby with the dirty bath water.