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Who runs the CIA?

The magnification of power and influence of the CIA and career bureaucracy, represented by John J. McMahon, the CIA deputy director, over President Reagan's personal appointee, CIA Director William J. Casey, is the untold story of the Reagan administration. It is today a matter of legitimate doubt among highly informed observers that even President Reagan's orders to the CIA to undertake covert operations could prevail over a McMahon veto.

To obtain confirmation or denial of the foregoing statements is impossible; understandably, because the CIA rarely discusses for publication the organization's inner workings. However, persons in a position to know and observe the CIA and who are free of organizational inhibitions clearly believe that the CIA career service has achieved a degree of power unparalleled in the intelligence agency's 37-year existence.

The reason for the disagreement between Mr. Casey and the McMahon career bureaucracy is not that the Reagan-Casey ideas are so off the wall that Mr. McMahon and his aides must rescue CIA professionalism from the antics of political appointees. CIA professional judgments have in the past proven to be misjudgments. CIA analysts, it is now known, have over the years been spectacularly wrong in their underestimates of Soviet

armaments expenditures, while outside experts have been correct. The CIA permanent staff has never had a monopoly on wisdom.

The continuing Casey-McMahon disagreement is based on how best to implement Reagan policies via the CIA. The White House endeavor to push the CIA into a more activist role via covert-action programs seems thus far to have been frustrated.

For example, following Soviet destruction of the Korean Air Lines passenger plane in September 1983, President Reagan is said to have ordered Mr. Casey to retaliate against the U.S.S.R. by shipping a quantity of surface-to-air missiles to the embattled Afghan mujahideen battling the then four-year-old Soviet invasion. Mr. McMahon succeeded in preventing execution of the proposal, arguing that it would be too difficult to accomplish. He may have been right or wrong; whichever it was, Mr. McMahon's view prevailed.

Another example: Some 200 Soviet soldiers are known to be either prisoners or deserters in the hands of Afghan resistance fighters. Mr. Casey proposed, with President Reagan's support, bringing to the United States about 65 Soviet POWs for a mass press

conference. Such a move would have served two purposes:

First, it would have relieved the Afghans of a burden. POWs are generally a problem — what do you do with them? — in a guerrilla war characterized by hit-and-run tactics.

Second, such a prisoner show with Red Army soldiers telling their story to the world media might have been a stunning blow against Soviet imperial interests in Central Asia. Mr. McMahon vetoed the idea and his veto stuck. Again, Mr. McMahon might have been right or wrong; whichever it was, his view prevailed.

The CIA career bureaucracy

opposed from the outset the mining of Nicaragua waters. Whatever plan the McMahon forces finally offered for interdicting military supplies to Nicaragua failed to do the job, so, as the saying goes in Washington, it was "all onus and no bonus." The congressional uproar as a result of the mining is said to

have strengthened Mr. McMahon's position vis-a-vis Mr. Casey.

These are some of the passages in the continuing battle between the Casey CIA and the McMahon CIA, with permanent possession of the trophy seemingly in the hands of the CIA professionals, who have also managed to prevent any significant number of new Casey appointees from entering CIA

ranks. In fact, of five Casey executive appointees, only two remain and it is not certain how much influence they have in the organization today.

Whether this situation would change in the event of Director Casey's promised reappointment during a possible second Reagan term remains to be seen.

One of the major reasons for this power accretion to the CIA old-boy network is the formalization of congressional oversight of the intelligence agency in two select permanent committees of the Congress. Dissenters within the CIA from Reagan-Casey covert action proposals now have a forum where their dissent can be heard and debated inside the committees.

Instead of the usual hierarchical arrangements within a government department, there are now lateral CIA staff connections with Congress which has institutionalized its constitutional power to oversee the executive branch. Until the mid-1970s, congressional oversight of the CIA was informal. This function was pretty much left in the hands of ranking members of senior congressional committees who, themselves, in the good old Allen Dulles days, preferred not to probe too deeply into what the CIA was doing. As a result of House and Senate investigations in the aftermath of Watergate, Congress successfully asserted its power over the intelligence agency.

There are those, however, who disagree with this analysis. They counter-argue that the problem lies not with the congressional committees but with Director Casey himself. The incumbent has not exercised his own power to the same degree as did Adm. Stanfield Turner, President Carter's CIA director, who, as one observer said, "whether you agreed with him or not, ran the CIA."

Watergate, the Nixon resignation and the short-lived Ford adminis-

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