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Casey Lighting a Fire Under the CIA but Problems Persist

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WASHINGTON—Despite an arrogant manner and a tendency to mumble, CIA Director William J. Casey has come a long way, even his critics concede, in restoring morale at the once badly shattered Central Intelligence Agency.

And spending for U.S. intelligence activities has been increased 10%, even though American agents overseas have not exactly been "unleashed" as President Reagan promised during the 1980 election campaign.

U.S. agents conducted about 10 undercover operations in the final year of Jimmy Carter's Administration, the same number as are now in progress.

"There is certainly more enthusiasm for (intelligence) operations now," one official said. "But they are limited by budget constraints, congressional oversight and the fact that this Administration does not yet have a coherent foreign policy which covert operations would be used to support.

"When they get their policy act together," this official predicted, "there will probably be more operations. The Carter Administration needed a moral rationale for such things. Until Afghanistan, they had none and there were virtually no clandestine activities for the first three Carter years.

Excuses Not Needed

"They saw the Soviet invasion as immoral, so gun-running (of Soviet-made arms from Egypt) to the Afghan rebels was justified. These (Reagan) people don't need such excuses," the official said.

But even as Casey and Reagan have moved to reinvigorate the nation's intelligence agencies, new problems have cropped up and some lingering, old problems have taken on new twists. For instance:

—The sordid "gun for hire" exploits of such former Central Intelligence agents as Edwin P. Wilson, who is accused of exporting terrorist equipment to Libya, have raised questions about the activities of CIA men once they leave the agency, especially those who use expertise

revived speculation about Russian "moles" inside U.S. intelligence agencies.

—The leaking of U.S. secrets to the press, although greatly reduced, has yet to be stopped.

The most recent case of leaked secrets found White House "hard-liners" pitted against CIA "liberals," reversing past patterns, amid almost comic confusion.

The case involved a CIA plan, approved by the White House, to provide several hundred thousand dollars to political activists in Mauritania, an Arab country in northwestern Africa, to counter money funneled to Mauritania by Libya. It was laid before the House and Senate Intelligence committees in June.

House Democrats objected to the operation and wrote a rare letter of protest to Reagan, whereupon the proposal was killed.

Existence of the letter was leaked a month later by White House officials, sources said, in an attempt to embarrass CIA leaders, including Casey and Deputy CIA Director Bobby R. Inman, who opposed efforts to give the CIA domestic spying authority.

The White House officials, led by Richard V. Allen, national security adviser to the President, have pushed for a "stronger" executive order to the intelligence agencies to satisfy the "unleashing" promises made in the campaign and to improve U.S. counterintelligence capabilities.

The comic aspects then began. A Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, based on second-hand knowledge, told a reporter the CIA plan was aimed at overthrowing, perhaps even assassinating, Libya's Moammar Kadafi. A White House official told a reporter, wrongly, that the target country was Mauritius, which is a black southeast African country. The correct country then was identified to calm the infuriated citizens of Mauritius.

"We shot ourselves in the foot with three countries over a plan that was never approved," one intelligence officer complained. "The KGB must still be laughing."

Reagan's executive order, which sought to make intelligence officials' authority over domestic spying fears a prospective gain.

Moreover, the FBI's counterintelligence division "does not need any unleashing," a senior FBI official said. "We have all the scope and range of authority we need to perform our mission." He also implied that he thought the FBI did not need any help from the CIA in its work.

Among congressmen on record against such moves are all the members of the Senate Intelligence Committee, both Republicans and Democrats. As Sen. Malcolm Wallop (R-Wyo.), put it, Reagan will be "pilloried" if he exposes "law-abiding Americans to CIA scrutiny."

Concerns of Congress

At least one more draft of a Reagan executive order for the CIA, which is intended to replace the 1978 order issued by Carter, is being written "to reflect the concerns of Congress," according to senior intelligence officials. Its release is expected within a few weeks.

Casey must take some blame for the controversy. Although he backed the intelligence community's view against the White House in the end, he long failed to heed warnings that Congress was not prepared to loosen the reins very much on intelligence activities.

This was part of Casey's larger failure to take Congress seriously during his first six months on the job, congressional and other sources said. He usually sent Inman, a congressional favorite and highly respected professional intelligence officer, to explain his policies to the lawmakers.

"It was a mistake to rely too