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Tinker, Turner, Sailor, Spy

By Michael Ledeen

Stansfield Turner, critics say, has demoralized and politicized the CIA.

IN HIS STATE OF THE UNION address, President Carter called for the end of unwarranted restrictions on American intelligence agencies. "An effective intelligence capability," he said, "is vital to our nation's security." Although the remark drew an ovation, there have been no dramatic initiatives from the Carter administration to revitalize what is generally considered to be a demoralized and often dangerously ineffective American intelligence community. Yet the president's words demonstrate that the mood of the administration—and with it, by all indications, that of the country—has changed dramatically from the time when the Central Intelligence Agency was considered to be a "rogue elephant" dangerously out of control.

What is required to realize the president's goals? According to those who have spent their lives in and around the intelligence business, the primary requirement is a change in the domestic attitude toward the CIA. Such persons—including former directors and top officials of the agency—say the CIA must be freed from some of the more exaggerated forms of congressional scrutiny, such as the Hughes-Ryan Amendment, which gives more than 200 senators and staff members access to agency data. They also urge that those members of government and the media who have harassed the intelligence community for the past half decade must now recognize that a viable intelligence agency is urgently needed. And, they say, the agency and the intelligence community as a whole badly need the finest possible leadership, both from the White House and from the office of the director of central intelligence (DCI). That post is currently occupied by Admiral Stansfield Turner, and in the view of an impressive number of intelligence experts, Admiral Turner is not able to lead the CIA back to respectability.

WITHIN MONTHS OF HIS 1977 appointment as DCI, Stansfield Turner had acquired the nickname "Captain Queeg" in CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. One morning in January 1979, he came to work to find the bulletin boards and mailboxes full of a forged edition of his own "Notes From the Director." Dated January 15, it has become an underground classic in the intelligence community:

I was in my office fairly exhausted last evening after stopping work at 10 P.M. As is my wont after a long day, I asked the

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steward to bring me a bowl of strawberries and cream. He's a good enough fellow—if a bit shiftless—and it wasn't long before he shuffled back to report that someone had stolen the strawberries from my refrigerator. It was my hardest blow since coming here . . . but I did without.

I could leave it at that. After all a new supply of strawberries can be purchased. But it's not that simple. I deem this a personal attack by someone who knew of my propensity for the fruit, using innocent strawberries to get at me.

I am therefore ordering that until the strawberries are returned to my refrigerator, no one will leave the building. The General Services Administration will be asked to augment meal service while we wait. As an added stimulus I am riffing 100 people per day until the wrong is righted. Any person helping to identify the thief will, beside an immediate quality step increase, be given a pair of stainless steel spheres similar to those I use for thinking the unpalatable thoughts our Communist adversaries force us to think.

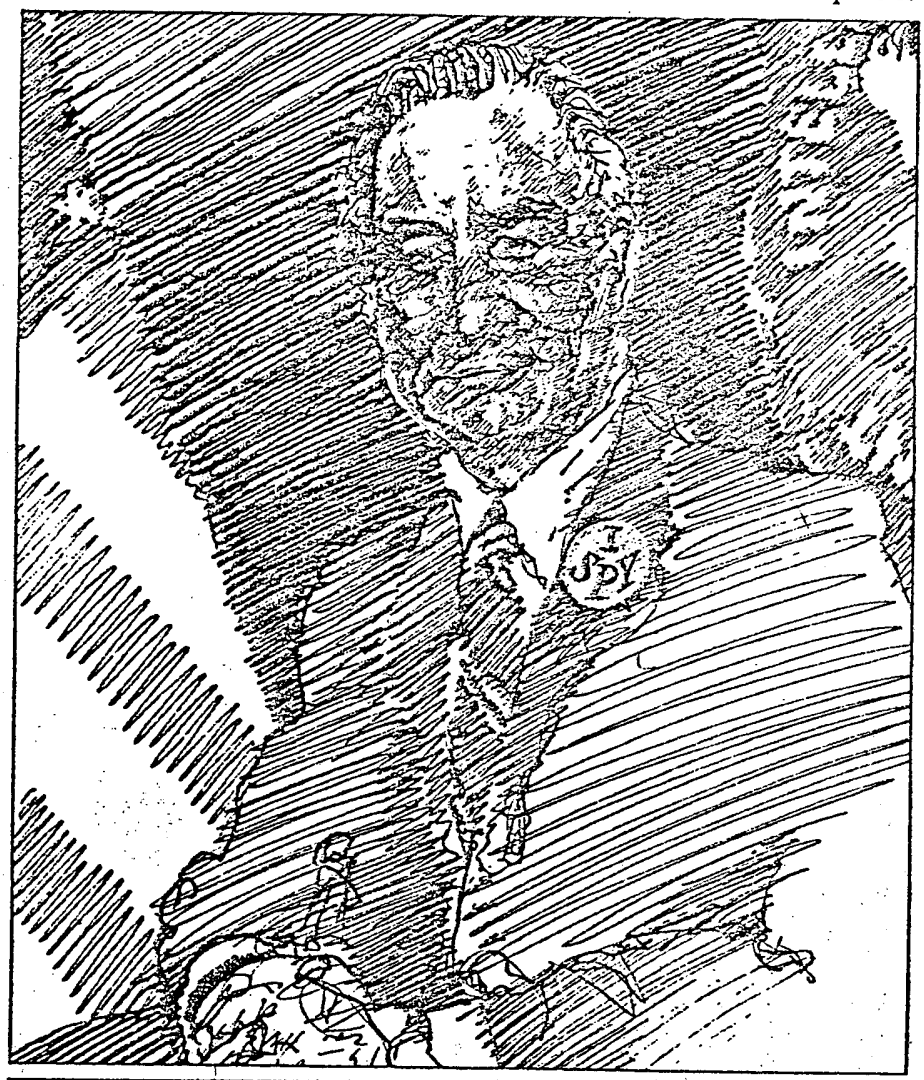
I will keep you informed on our progress in this as we move along. Chances are the pinko commie strawberry-fetish fink will see the error of his ways and surrender. I'd almost bet my Navy pension on it. Finally and again, I feel some remorse in having to do this but national security is hardball and not for softies.

The admiral did not find the document amusing, and he ordered the CIA Security Office to find the persons responsible—a task which has proved a failure. But as Turner must have realized, the forgery reflected the conviction of a large number of agency officials past and present that the former admiral is the wrong man for the job, and that he should be removed before further serious, even irreparable, damage is done to the CIA.

My own investigation—including an hour-long conversation with Turner in his office at CIA headquarters at Langley—has largely confirmed this gloomy analysis. Leading CIA officials—some of whom have left only within recent months, and others who are in the process of leaving—say that Turner has done more harm to the CIA than all the recent congressional investigations combined. And it is difficult finding any Turner supporters. When I asked National Security Council press man Jerry Schecter to arrange some interviews for me with NSC officials and staffers, he called back a few days later to say that nobody wanted to discuss the CIA and Admiral Turner. Not for the record, not on background, no way at all. Later, when I advised the CIA's information office that I had been given a great quantity of information critical of Admiral Turner, and that I would like to go over it with agency officials in an effort to get a more rounded picture, I was permitted to speak with just one man: Bruce Clarke, the elegant and erudite head of the National Foreign Assessment Center. But Clarke is only recently returned to the CIA after five years in Vienna and thus is in no position to evaluate Turner in context. And I was not even permitted to be alone with Clarke; Director of Public Affairs Herbert Hetu, a man with a reputation for loyalty to the admiral, sat in. Similarly, during the interview with Turner himself, three assistants—including the redoubtable Hetu—were at the table.

I encountered a similar reluctance to discuss Turner in the intelligence committees of Congress. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Chairman Birch Bayh was not available for comment, nor was Staff Director William Miller. In short; Turner's critics are talking, while his allies—if there are any—are lying low.

The charges against Turner are serious ones. According to his critics he has undermined the morale of the intelligence community, wantonly and arbitrarily fired hundreds of valuable officers, presided over a steady decline in the quality of intelligence, and politicized much of the information flowing from Langley to the White House.



Turner has resisted independent checks and balances on spying.

WHEN HE ARRIVED IN the spring of 1977, Turner found a memorandum left behind by the survivors of the last year of the Nixon-Ford period. Drafted by Bill Nelson (a top officer in the DDO—the Directorate of Operations, that directorate concerned with clandestine activity), the memo claimed that there had been a "Vietnam bulge" in the clandestine services. Nelson has accordingly

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argued that several hundred agents could be phased out of the clandestine side without any substantial damage to the CIA's effectiveness. In fact, no such "bulge" existed—or ever had. The size of the Operations Directorate's Far East Division increased enormously during the Vietnam war, along with the size of that division's overseas contingents in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. But this increase in manpower was achieved primarily by depleting the ranks of the other divisions of the clandestine services. Overall, the strength of the clandestine services actually declined during the decade 1965–75.

Stansfield Turner may not have known all this, and in any event most observers agree that the clandestine services were overstaffed when Turner came aboard. But some of his more relentless critics have argued that Turner accepted the conclusions of the Nelson memo because they fitted so nicely with the political mood of the early days of the Carter administration. The admiral denied this to me with considerable intensity, and he was almost certainly telling the truth. For had Turner wished to perform a politically acceptable purge of the ranks of the clandestine services, he would not have done it as he did.

Nelson had proposed that the number of clandestine officers be reduced gradually over a five-year period. Turner did it in two years. And he did it in a way calculated to produce great resentment at the agency itself. For instead of entrusting the task to the various divisions, Turner turned the matter over to the personnel office, with instructions to computerize the process and thin out the ranks of the senior people to make room for younger men and women to move up.

Computerized profiles were used to draw up the lists of those who were to be compelled to leave. All officers, in each grade level, were competitively ranked by the computerized formulas. From each grade level, including the highest (GS-18), a number of victims were chosen. In November 1978, these unlucky souls received pink slips signed not by Turner but by William Wells, then DDO. Wells himself was then fired as DDO partly because of the fallout from the purge.

Turner told me he was "aghast" when he saw the harsh, terse letter that went out to the persons on the computerized hit list, and he says he toyed with the idea of issuing a second, more gentle note. He also told me that he was not intimately involved in the procedures that led to the selection of the names, and that he had received no complaints from the agency's senior ranks prior to the actual firings. In fact, the purge was not a total surprise, for Turner had conducted two extended briefings on the matter in August, in the secure "bubble" at Langley. On each occasion the house was full: 500 persons at a time. Yet, he claims, not a single senior official in the DDO told him not to proceed.

Others in the CIA tell a different story. Two senior officials say they personally implored Turner to adopt a more traditional method of reducing the number of officials in the clandestine services. Moreover, according to these and other sources, Turner was intimately involved in the process from beginning to end.

This was not the first time in the agency's history that a new DCI had wielded his authority like a Sword of Damocles over the heads of his employees, but Turner's approach—whichever version is correct—was quite different from the earlier ones. Even James Schlesinger, whose purge in his brief tenure at Langley is still legendary, had the good sense to assign the selection of the victims to other intelligence officers, not a computer. While there was great resentment of Schlesinger's actions, there was consequently a general appreciation of his methods, since the implementation of some of Schlesinger's cuts was tempered by the more compassionate judgment of some of his senior subordinates, notably his director of personnel. With Turner, the human touch was far more distant. Officers with years of experience were summarily dismissed without the slightest flexibility. Men a few months short of higher pension levels were thrown out, although no one within two years of retirement was fired.

The Turner purge was not simply the result of a misunderstanding about

At the CIA's Virginia headquarters, some call Turner "Captain Queeg."

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the "Vietnam bulge," for the admiral had been approached by a group of younger officers claiming that channels for advancement in the clandestine services had been blocked for years by the "old-boy network." Turner took these complaints seriously, and one of the reasons for the purge was his sincere conviction that it was necessary to provide greater opportunities for the younger officers. While the motive is an admirable one, the analysis turned out to be unfounded: Last year one of the country's top management-consultancy firms was asked to look at the personnel policies of the clandestine services, and these policies were pronounced outstanding. Thus, two major motives for the great purge—the Vietnam bulge and the theory of favoritism in the clandestine services—were both unfounded.

The realization that Turner's actions were based upon misunderstandings and misconceptions only heightened the bitterness toward him, especially among senior officers. But even in the middle and lower ranks, morale was badly undermined, for they saw officials struck down who were among the finest persons at the CIA. In one celebrated case, for example, the computers printed out the name of one of the top clandestine operatives in Western Europe, a man who was on a first-name basis with many chiefs of state and heads of government, and who had been operating successfully for over twenty years. When challenged on that particular selection, the admiral announced that he would not overrule the computer. By last October, over 800 positions had been closed down in the clandestine services, and more than 1,100 persons had been driven from the ranks. And even though Turner says that only 160 people left involuntarily, one must wonder if some of these persons are not sufficiently angry to cooperate with the agency's enemies.

TURNER HAS LONG BEEN known as an aloof, almost unapproachable, individual when it comes to dealing with people. When he was in charge of NATO's southern command in Naples, Turner was notoriously awkward in dealing with his subordinates. When it was learned that Turner had been recalled to Washington early in 1977 by Carter, his navy colleagues told anyone who cared to listen that they hoped the admiral would not end up on the Joint Chiefs of Staff or back in their service.

Most damaging of all to the morale of the CIA has been Turner's insensitivity toward some of the agency's most talented and experienced members. Late last summer, on successive Fridays, there were retirement parties at Langley for three of the CIA's most esteemed officers: Ted Shackley, George Carver, and Dan Arnold. None was fired; all were driven out by Turner's behavior. Shackley and Carver were forced to choose between retirement and accepting a post that would have represented a de facto demotion. Arnold left because he was appalled by what was happening to the clandestine services and because he had lost all respect for Turner's integrity and his capacity to exercise leadership.

A spokesman for Turner told me that the admiral did not encourage these people to leave, and the official line at the agency is that resignations are only to be expected at a time when the agency finds it hard to compete with the private sector in salaries, fringe benefits, and vacations.

But the Shackley case is instructive on this matter: Widely considered one of the most talented members of the DDO (he was instrumental in organizing the highly successful defense of Laos in the undeclared war of the late 1960s), Shackley was associate DDO when Turner arrived. He was asked to serve as deputy to Army Lieutenant General Frank Camm at the newly created National Intelligence Tasking Center. This office was supposed to coordinate the collection assignments of the entire intelligence community, but it never really got off the ground, despite an impressive bureaucratic expansion to a staff of some 150 persons. Camm, a military man of no particular distinction and no real knowledge of intelligence, stayed on for a couple of years and then left early in 1979. Shackley was obviously in line to replace him, but Turner stalled, apparently unable to make up his mind. After months of waiting, and by now convinced that Turner had no interest in promoting him, Shackley resigned. Turner has said that the resignation came as a total surprise, and that he regretted it. Sources close to Shackley respond in two ways: First, it certainly seemed that Turner wanted Shackley out, for otherwise he could have told Shackley something positive. Second, if Turner in fact did not realize the impact of his behavior, he should not be in charge of a large organization whose proper functioning depends primarily on the existence of a strong esprit de corps.

Turner does not seem to appreciate this fact. In our conversation he repeatedly stated his satisfaction with the "new personnel policies" he has instituted, and he boasted that the CIA is now more "balanced and representative" than ever before. He said that in the old days, agency personnel came primarily from the Ivy League universities (a charge made in the late 1950s by Senator John F. Kennedy, but found to be false even twenty years ago), whereas it now has better geographical balance. Moreover, according to Turner, there are now more ethnics, more blacks, and more women in the agency. There is even a woman at the head of a major station overseas, and there will be another female station chief in the near future. And Turner takes great personal interest in the younger officers. A few weeks ago he surprised everyone by having lunch with five of the new recruits; he told me that he was "inspired" by their qualities of intelligence and enthusiasm.

The admiral's concern for the younger officers and his up-to-date interest in equal opportunity are genuine, but in a properly functioning intelligence organization great care must also be paid to the senior ranks. According to several senior diplomats I spoke to, the quality of CIA performance overseas has dropped steadily for the past few years, an inevitable consequence of drooping morale and less experienced officers. Finally, there is the story (apocryphal, perhaps) of a person instructed to get in touch with a CIA clandestine operative in a Central European capital. He was given a meeting place in a busy part of town and went to the appointment only to find that his CIA contact was a very tall, and very black, man who was the major curiosity in the area. Obviously, undercover conversation was impossible.

TURNER'S DIFFICULTIES WITH his employees might be overlooked if the quality of reports and estimates had improved under his stewardship. Unfortunately, this has not happened. Instead, there has apparently been a new and alarming politicization of intelligence.

To be sure, there is nothing new about the DCI's taking an active role in tailoring intelligence estimates to fit policy needs. Indeed, it is a vital part of his job. But Turner seems to be particularly sensitive to White House predilections. Aside from the case of Iran, in which CIA estimates were atrocious, but which can be charitably laid at the feet of several directors and administrations, his critics cite three grave failures: the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, the Cambodian famine, and the Soviet brigade in Cuba.

In the Cambodian cases, Turner had repeatedly received detailed information from officers in the field that indicated what was about to happen. Yet in both

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instances—in two successive years—he passed on estimates to the White House that took the opposite position. Were these simple failures in analysis, or were they, as some of those involved in the estimates angrily claim, examples of preparing estimates to suit the prevailing mood in the White House? The president and some of his top advisers were eager to normalize relations with Vietnam, and predictions of an imminent invasion of Cambodia—with full Soviet support—were likely to irritate the policymakers. Similarly, reports of the disastrous famine in Cambodia a year after—beginning as early as January—were not likely to be well received by an administration that claimed to have "lost its inordinate fear of Communism." Thus, as late as June 1979, the CIA said there would be no famine.

Likewise the Soviet brigade. Carter had been working for better relations with Castro's Cuba and had also been striving to minimize the degree of Soviet adventurism at a time when the image of the Kremlin was crucial for selling SALT II to skeptical senators. As a sign of his good faith, Carter had ordered the suspension of U-2 surveillance flights over Cuba. The National Security Agency continued its general interception of foreign communications but was not instructed to "listen" for specific bits of information. Moreover, human sources in Cuba were reduced. Thus, when claims of a new Soviet military presence on the island were brought forward by Senator Richard Stone of Florida, the CIA denied having any such information. Once the surveillance flights were resumed, the Soviet troops were quickly identified, but no clear picture of their purpose emerged. That could reliably come only from experienced human sources. Thus, Turner's critics accuse him of failing to insist on maintaining surveillance over Cuba, failing to take seriously the warnings that arrived, and failing to use human intelligence properly. They add that it is no accident that human intelligence is currently in short supply, given the admiral's desire to open the way for less experienced officers and his actions to remove so many of the old hands. Yet the admiral told interviewers from National Public Radio last December that the discovery of the Soviet brigade in Cuba was one of the triumphs of his stewardship.

The same bending to the prevailing political winds can be seen in the CIA's curious handling of the Palestine Liberation Organization. For years, the agency's primary interest in international terrorism had centered on this organization; it paid perceptibly less attention to other groups like the Italian Red Brigades and the German Baader-Meinhof band. Yet in a closed briefing to congressional oversight committees, CIA representatives argued last fall that it would be improper to term the PLO a "terrorist" organization, that the group was actually "moderate" and simply maintained a façade of terrorism to curry favor with "radical Arabs." This opinion fits nicely with the convictions of the White House that the PLO must play a major role in a future Middle East peace settlement and that its leadership is basically "moderate."

NOT ONLY HAS TURNER overseen a politicization of intelligence, but he has resisted efforts to provide ongoing independent checks and balances within the agency and the community. Turner supported the questionable decision to eliminate the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB), charged with taking an independent look at the quality of the intelligence community's product. PFIAB had often been able to recommend to the president and the DCI courses of action that had not occurred to the community "regulars," and most CIA veterans regarded it as extraordinarily useful. Now there is no independent body with the same broad authority to make recommendations directly to the president. Instead, Turner characteristically created an in-house body—the Senior Review Panel—that examines intelligence estimates at an early stage in their production and can suggest different lines of analysis.

Finally, Turner has insisted on maintaining maximum control over the entire community and over the day-to-day operations of the agency. When he became director, the number-two position at the

Turner, using a computer printout, fired many of the CIA's top agents.

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According to sources, Turner has tailored intelligence analyses to fit the White House viewpoint.

agency and in the community—the deputy director of central intelligence, or DDCI—was held by E. Henry Knoche, a longtime agency professional. Under Turner's predecessor George Bush, the DDCI had been in charge of most normal activities at the CIA, while the director had been concerned with overall planning, liaison with Congress and the executive branch, and the coordination of the intelligence community. Turner indicated his desire to assume many of the DDCI's roles himself, leaving Knoche with a greatly diminished task. Knoche lasted less than six months and left on July 5, 1977. According to high-level CIA sources, Knoche quit because Turner had made it clear he did not want a deputy director with a substantive role, and Knoche was concerned that under Turner the agency was losing ground with respect to the other components of the intelligence community.

WITH KNOCHE'S DEPARTURE, Turner had a clear field for the selection of a new deputy director. At first it seemed he was content to leave the post vacant, and in fact he told a group of CIA officers in the late summer of 1977 that on those occasions when he was absent from Langley, operations responsibility could simply be assumed by the chief of operations of the DDCI. But Turner did set about finding an acceptable replacement for Knoche, and his first choice was Lyman Kirkpatrick, one of the oldest of the old hands. All seemed clear for his appointment as deputy when Turner suddenly changed his mind. After discussing the question with senior White House officials, Turner hit on former ambassador to Portugal Frank Carlucci. Despite press reports that Carlucci was imposed on Turner, the admiral told me that the selection was entirely his own. It was, in any event, a remarkable choice, for it was one of the few times since the agency's inception that the two top men in the organization came from outside the intelligence community. Yet there was reason to believe that Carlucci would give the CIA what it so badly needed: an independent and courageous person willing to fight for real professionalism. His background in Lisbon, where he successfully challenged Henry Kissinger's dismal view of the future of that country, gave those unhappy with Turner cause for optimism, as did his behavior in the first few weeks at Langley.

Every deputy director receives from the director a written delegation of authority, defining the DDCI's role and authorizing him to see some or all of the information that passes over the director's desk. Turner dragged his feet for weeks and then tried to get Carlucci to accept a limited document. Carlucci refused, saying that he felt he had to see everything that Turner saw —a reasonable request, for the DDCI can be asked to substitute for the director in various circumstances and would have to be fully informed in such events. In the end, Turner gave in. There may well be some private understandings between the two, but in theory Carlucci knows what Turner knows.

Yet despite this promising start, Carlucci has not played a major role within the agency. Now known as Hamlet to his colleagues, Carlucci has played the part of loyal lieutenant to Turner. So far as is known, he has never tried to challenge Turner on a matter of substance.

IT WAS ALMOST CERTAINLY AN error on Carter's part to appoint his old friend and Annapolis classmate to the post of director of central intelligence. But Turner is not without his strengths, and despite the current closed-mouth policy regarding his achievements, he can point with considerable pride to some substantial accomplishments. For one thing, he has taken seriously the deteriorating security at the CIA and has acted to cut down on the number of leaks, both to the press and to other outsiders. CIA analysts are no longer permitted casual contact with the press and are now required to have journalists file formal requests for conversations, listing the time and place of the meeting along with proposed subjects for discussion. Turner has also insisted upon vigorous action against those such as Philip Agee who emerge from the CIA and write their "confessions."

Furthermore, the quality of intelligence has improved in some areas. Foreign-intelligence sources insist that the CIA has done well, even remarkably so, in areas where it had been weak in the past. In particular, the CIA's information and analysis regarding some parts of Africa have been exceptionally good of late, as has been the material regarding China. To what extent this has been due to Turner's leadership is impossible to say, but it may well reflect—positively, for once—the increased interest in these areas by the White House.

Finally, there is the case of SALT II, where Turner showed unusual courage and integrity as well as striking independence of the desires of the administration. Turner told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that he could not guarantee that the United States would be certain of knowing about Soviet violations of the terms of the treaty. Given the loss of crucial listening and observation posts in Iran, Turner said it might be years before these capabilities were replaced. He spoke his mind, despite the feverish efforts of the president, the secretary of state, and the secretary of defense to convince the Senate that the reverse was true.

Thus, whatever his critics may say, Stansfield Turner has shown that he is capable, on occasion, of standing by his guns, even when such a stance is unpopular with his commander in chief. This is a rare quality in Washington and is much to be admired. Paradoxically, it is precisely this breach of political discipline that has made it so unlikely that Turner will be removed from his post in the near future. For Carter and his colleagues fear that firing Turner would inevitably give rise to suspicions that he was removed because he failed to support the administration on a policy matter like SALT.

In the long run, however, Turner will have to go. No matter how substantial his achievements (and there are undoubtedly several that are, and will remain, unknown for a long time), his failure of leadership at the CIA is a fatal one. For in the next half decade, the United States will face a series of challenges that cannot be solved by the mere application of superior might. America no longer holds a decisive advantage over its adversaries —indeed, in many categories the relationship has been inverted. Therefore, the country will have to find more subtle ways of dealing with crises. This inevitably requires a first-class, well-functioning, and highly motivated CIA. Without the finest caliber of leadership, the CIA cannot function as it will have to in the years ahead. Unfortunately, Stansfield Turner is not the man for the job. ■