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Turner 'Very Optimistic' About CIA's Future

But Critics Despair That Spy Agency Can't Do Good Job

Second of two articles

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Looking casual in a navy blue cardigan but speaking intensely, Stansfield Turner gazed out the glass wall of his office, atop the CIA headquarters at Langley, over the bare dusky woods toward the distant lights of Washington and exuded confidence about his organization.

"I'm just very optimistic these days," Turner said. "I've been very impressed by the quality of our human intelligence activities," the CIA director said. And U.S. technical intelligence is superlative, he added.

In other government offices in the city, most of them looking across concrete courtyards at other offices instead of having spacious views, in the private offices of people who have left the government, in small restaurants, in telephone calls from coast to coast, others talk about the CIA, too.

Some, like former CIA Director William E. Colby and former Deputy Director Enno Henry Knoche, talk for quotation about things like restrictions on the agency. But most prefer to discuss the agency's problems, from the protection of anonymity.

Turner understandably is angered by this, especially on the most emotional aspect of his three-year tenure at Langley, the forced retirement of people from the clandestine services. He argues that he rejuvenated an aging agency.

"The next time someone tells you," he said, "that Turner is the stupid bastard who cut the size of the agency out here, look at the color of his hair. . . . This is a young man's game, and we are better equipped today than we were three years ago" for clandestine operations.

The CIA is composed of three main branches. The clandestine or operations branch handles spying and covert operations, like intervening secretly in other countries' affairs or organizing guerrilla movements. Another branch supervises technical intelligence, including reconnaissance satellite photography and communications intercepts. An analytical branch pulls information together for government policymakers.

The controversy that has marked Turner's almost three years at the agency focuses on the operations branch. There is also widespread but less publicized distress around Washington about analysis.

In both cases, Turner inherited problems. His critics say he exacerbated them; his supporters contend that he has done much to clear them up.

Once Was Twice as Large

The Vietnam war and the CIA's "secret army" in Laos, added to worldwide spying, pushed the number of agency operatives to 8,500 in the late 1960s — roughly double its present size. As the Nixon administration began to reduce U.S. commitments in Indochina, personnel had to be reduced by attrition, transfers and other means.

During his brief tenure as CIA director, James R. Schlesinger speeded up a cutback. Colby, his successor, continued the program, and so did George Bush during his year as director. Most sources agree that they were handled sensibly.

Then President Carter took Turner from his navy admiral's command and sent him to Langley. He arrived with what the old CIA hands considered to be a skeptical, even hostile, attitude.

This set a chilly tone to his takeover, despite his own explanations that he simply wanted to bring better management to a sometimes uncoordinated operation. His suspicions of the need for drastic changes were quickly reinforced by the resignation of John Stockwell, a 40-year-old agent in the unsuccessful CIA effort in Angola.

Stockwell charged that a clique of burned-out, old clandestine services officials was running the agency into the ground. Turner heard this and other grievances, rejected advice on alternatives for dealing with them and launched the "Halloween massacre."

After announcing in August 1977 that 816 jobs in the operations branch would be cut by 1979, Turner sent out the first 212 pink slips on Oct. 31, 1977.

Although smaller than previous cuts, this one was handled differently and hit harder at lifetime professionals in the spying and paramilitary trades.

Says Cuts Helped Agency

"The cuts in personnel that everyone still complains to me about have strengthened the agency's covert action capabilities," Turner said.

"You don't run a good, strong paramilitary or covert action program with a bunch of 55-year-olds," he said. "What I've done is cut out high-grade superstructure . . . and doubled the input into the clandestine services . . . so that we have a group of young tigers, and there's enough accumulated experience and expertise around to guide them."

This is strongly challenged by people in a position to know.

"Whatever Turner says, they can't put on a show," says a Pentagon official who is very familiar with the CIA's present operational capabilities.

"We know that over in this building . . ."

Other sources spell this out in more detail. One says the CIA's corps of paramilitary specialists who could help organize, for instance, a more effective Afghan resistance to Soviet control has declined from about 200 to 80; and many of the 80 lack the broad experience needed for effectiveness.

But Colby comments that, if the people in an operational area feel CIA help is vital, they will find ways to speed it up.

The worst part of Turner's changes, numerous present and retired officials say, is what they did to CIA morale. While he recognizes that morale suffered, but contends it is now coming back up, others say that it is at best bumping along sideways.

Several sources cite cases of Turner's failure to back up agents who got in trouble taking risks that were known and accepted by the agency in advance as normal for the job.

Knoche, who was the deputy CIA director when Turner arrived and worked for him a few months, says that "the premium has been in the last few years on not rippling the water, on being non-controversial and not getting in trouble. In this profession, that's the wrong attitude, and now the chickens may have come home to roost" as a result both of too much congressional oversight and of Turner's policies.

"A spy agency is always going to have some people who bend rules or play close to the limits of them," Knoche added. "In peacetime they can be a bureaucratic nuisance, but they may be just the kind of people you need when you run into a crisis."

They are the kind of people who have not fitted into Turner's desire for managerial tidiness and career regularity. The result, many sources say, is that the CIA is poorer without them — and so is the country.

The picture derived from extensive inquiries is of a deadened, demoralized organization. But Turner contends otherwise.

"When I got here," he said, "the agency was just about maturing in the end of its first working generation, 30 years roughly, and a lot of the procedures were still geared to the small Ivy League club that came out of the OSS (the World War II Office of Strategic Services), and a lot of the procedures were stultified after 30 years, and if there's one thing you have to have in this kind of business it's dynamic, imaginative, forward-looking people."

"The principal things I have tried to do have been to instill that sense," Turner said.

Turner went to the old Ivy League club in an effort to improve the quality of CIA analysis. He put the analysis branch under Robert R. Bowie, who at the age of 68 in 1977 had been the head of the State Department's policy planning and then had run Harvard's Center for International Affairs for 15 years.

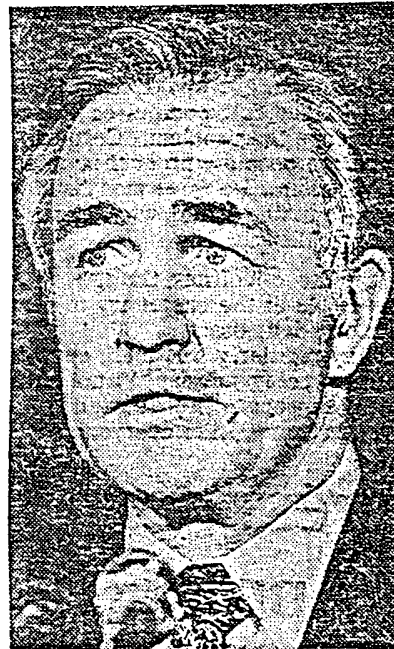
Bowie expected to be a senior intellectual in residence to advise Turner. Instead, he had to supervise some 1,500 analysts. By most accounts, it was a bureaucratic failure that did nothing to sort out organizational problems in analysis or improve the quality.

Colby had sought improvements by establishing a system of national intelligence officers (NIO), with each NIO responsible for final judgments on a particular country or area. If the system ever worked, it is working poorly now, a number of experts in the intelligence community feel.

In some cases the NIO's lack the background for making final judgments among conflicting interpretations. The present NIO for a very important country, for instance, was distinguished several years ago when he was a diplomat in that country for being totally wrong about its political developments.

Sometimes all of the experts from around town on a particular country or subject are assembled by the CIA to discuss it. But what the NIO later writes up bears little resemblance to the collective wisdom, some experts complain. And Turner himself has been known to change analytical conclusions before sending them to the White House.

The result is worse than frustration for many experts. It is a feeling that the kind of myopia that led to a 1978 CIA finding of the shah's being solidly in control can be too easily repeated — although there now seems to be a developing tendency at the agency to adopt a protective posture of leaning over the other direction by being free with warnings of trouble.



STANSFIELD TURNER
Defends actions