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CIA official says 'nothing' means success

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When the Central Intelligence Agency fails to provide timely, accurate information to the nation's leaders, the error often makes headlines.

But when the agency is successful, few people are aware, CIA official Helene Boatner told more than 100 people at the University of Colorado's World Affairs Conference Tuesday.

"Our successes rarely get attention," lamented Boatner, director of the agency's office of management. "Our greatest successes occur sometimes when nothing happens."

Boatner noted some of the agency's more spectacular failures during the past three decades and listed successes for which praise has been elusive. She defended the CIA's record in a field where some failures "are as certain as death and taxes."

"There's always room for improvement, but overall I think we're doing a good job for the country," said the 22-year CIA veteran.

Some of the CIA's best-known errors include the failure to predict the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1978 and the Egyptian attack across the Suez Canal in 1973. Other major events missed by the CIA include the 1968 Tet offensive in the Vietnam War and the deployment of Soviet missiles that

led to the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.

"There's isn't any question we've made major errors," Boatner said.

Successes include predictions of the launching of the first Soviet satellite in 1957, worsening relations between the Soviet Union and China in the 1960s, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Soviet reluctance to invade Poland in 1981 and the decline of Soviet oil production in the 1980s.

The result of other intelligence provided by the CIA is harder to judge, Boatner said.

During the bloody 1971 India-Pakistan War which led to the creation of Bangladesh, the CIA reported that India was preparing to totally "destroy the Pakistani Army." When U.S. leaders confronted India, the claim was denied and no all-out attack was launched.

"Who knows what effect" the CIA information had, Boatner asked.

"Often we're dealing with fragmentary information and we're dealing with parties that are trying to conceal what they are doing," she said.

Boatner said the role of intelligence "is to contribute to the formation of foreign policy that has a chance of succeeding.

"Notice that I didn't say 'good or bad'. That is a decision of the president.

"Intelligence is very seldom able to convince a skeptic, but it

can convince an open-minded person."

She cited CIA reports of Soviet arms shipments to Central America as an example of intelligence that an "open-minded person" would accept.

Congressional probes in the 1970s, while critical of much of what the CIA had done, also found that the agency was "badly underfunded and understaffed." The CIA now has a larger budget, including more money for travel, conferences and recruiting on campuses.

"We don't make policy, we carry it out," Boatner emphasized. Decisions on what the CIA does "are made at the highest levels of U.S. government."