

Modern Intelligence: Myth and Reality

STATINTL

By William E. Colby

WASHINGTON—The Aztecs thought the Sun God had to be strengthened each day by the sacrifice of a young man or woman. Without the sacrifice the sun could not rise.

The myth of the Sun God's need drove the nation through the daily travail of the sacrifice.

The reality of astronomy to explain the sunrise was unknown.

Today we have myths about our intelligence. They are expressed in sensational catchwords: "dirty tricks," "invisible government," "terminate with extreme prejudice," "lie to anyone but the President," "infiltration of the White House," "destabilization," "secret war," "massive illegal."

They come from old, outmoded ideas about intelligence: espionage, intrigue, derring-do.

These myths achieve lives of their own. Formal denials, evidence to the contrary, and independent, serious, follow-up assessments of the true proportions of a catch phrase never overtake the original allegation. The myth becomes accepted as reality.

In normal times, these myths are but part of the life of an intelligence professional, like the anonymity and the lonely challenges, intellectual as well as physical, of a demanding craft.

Today, however, these individual myths are gaining momentum and mass. They tend to portray intelligence as unconstitutional, improper, unwanted by our citizens. They threaten American intelligence's ability to contribute to the political, economic and military safety and welfare of our nation. These myths threaten intelligence's ability to help our country to negotiate with—not confront—opponents in an unsettled world.

If we believe these myths, we can make our own mistaken Aztec sacrifice—American intelligence—in the belief that only thus can the democratic sun of our free society rise.

We must not sacrifice a virile, a necessary, contributor to the safety of our nation, the welfare of our citizens, and peacekeeping in the world of the future to a handful of myths. The reality of intelligence today is as different from the myths about it as the reality of astronomy from the Aztec myth of the sunrise.

Let's note some of the realities:

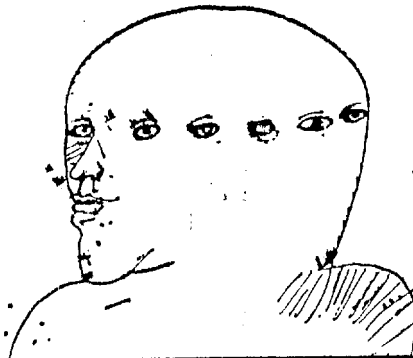
Our careful centralization of foreign information from open, public sources provides us with a compendium and continuity of facts.

America's technical genius has revolutionized intelligence. It has given us new views of distant objects, new abilities to analyze and absorb masses of data and detail, new electronic ways to keep up with the fast-moving and complex world of today.

To these must still be added that information that we can only get from the resourceful, dedicated clandestine operator. He is the only one who can overcome the barriers of the closed and hostile societies that share our planet. He can tell us of secret plans for tomorrow or the research ideas of today. He tells us of the human interaction—something no technology can show—among groups and leaders of closed societies.

Experts of independence, talent and

Drawings by Douglas Florian



continued

intellectual integrity study this wealth of reporting. They write objective assessments of world affairs free from domestic political bias or Government departments' budget desires.

Intelligence collection and analysis cover not only military threats but political problems and economic dangers as well. Intelligence forecasts of future trends abroad permit us to make national decisions about future foreign threats in time to react.

Intelligence permits us to negotiate international differences before they become disputes. And today the excellence of our information now contributes to a new role for intelligence: peacemaking and peacekeeping.

With sure information about the plans, capabilities and dispositions of the political and military forces on both sides of foreign crises, we can clarify their misunderstandings of each other that might lead them to go to

war; we can reassure both sides of getting from us early warning of hostile moves by the other side.

Perhaps the strongest myths relate to the Central Intelligence Agency's mission of covert political and paramilitary action. Today's reality is that little of this nature is done. What is done is fully controlled by the policy levels of our Government and is reported to committees of the Congress.

This, then, is the reality of modern intelligence. We understand why the myths arose, as we understand why the Aztec myth was born, but serious and scientific investigations by the Congressional committees examining intelligence will clarify the need of our free society for intelligence and show the excellence of the intelligence structure that serves it. They should also show the true proportions of the missteps of the past, and the national atmosphere in which they occurred.

With this new perception of reality should also come clear direction and effective supervision. This will insure that the new reality remains fully compatible with our free society. For this, too, is a reality of American

intelligence, that it must conform to the will of the American public as well as our constitutional procedures.

This need not include some new myth that "the public has a right to know" everything. The citizen does have a right to expect that this new reality of intelligence will protect his country's essential secrets.

We protect other American secrets, proceedings of grand juries, diplomacy, trade, income tax and census data, although intelligence secrets are being exposed in unprecedented, and dangerous, volume.

Secrecy is not new in America. Intelligence professionals accept, indeed seek, a better discipline to enforce adherence to the fundamental obligation of intelligence, that it protect its sources.

With public understanding of the realities of American intelligence, we can avoid a useless Aztec sacrifice. Nor need we believe that ultimate myth: that America does not have the responsibility and restraint necessary to have the best intelligence service in the world.

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