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Interview

LESS SECRECY

Turner Plies Rough Seas at CIA Helm

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WASHINGTON—Not much of the turbulence shows on the surface, but the Central Intelligence Agency is undergoing some of the most profound changes it has endured since its creation 30 years ago.

Change of some sort was almost inevitable after three years of controversy over assassination plots, drug experiments and other activities. But what is happening to the CIA could shape its performance and that of other U.S. intelligence agencies for years to come. And when things finally are sorted out, the CIA will bear the personal stamp of one man, an Oxford-educated admiral with a taste for the dramatic: Stansfield Turner.

With a rhetorical flourish, Turner began his tenure as the 10th CIA director by renouncing the philosophy that had sustained spies through the ages. In his agency, Turner declared, requirements of national security will never again be used to justify breaking the law.

"There is no balance between collecting intelligence and protecting the legal rights of American citizens," Turner said in an interview. "The legal rights have to come first . . .

"I'm not concerned about inhibitions on illegal activities, because we don't want to do anything illegal with regard to American citizens," he said. "We have adequate authority today to do the job of collecting the intelligence that this country needs."

Beyond this declaration of policy, which makes the CIA unique among the world's intelligence agencies, there have been dozens of changes on a day-to-day level affecting the way the CIA and such other organizations as the National Security Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency go about their business. Although Turner did not originate all of the changes, he has assumed responsibility for putting them into practice.

Among the innovations:

—The CIA's euphemistically named Directorate of Operations, the division that handles espionage and covert manipulation of foreign political activity, is cutting back more than 800 jobs. That's a huge reduction in a staff of fewer than 5,000. The reductions are to be made during the next two years.

—Efforts are being made to strip away some of the can't-talk-about-it secrecy that has always been part of the mystique of intelligence. The CIA years ago told its story through books it covertly financed while classifying its own reports. Now it is openly publishing its studies on such topics as oil reserves in the Soviet Union and international terrorism.

And for the first time the agency is offering the public guided tours of its campus-like headquarters in Langley, Va., a Washington suburb.

—A special committee including officials from other government agencies has been created to determine the sort of information that should be collected by the previously free-wheeling CIA. It is the first time the agency has been required to deal with such an "intelligence users" group, and the policy could have far-reaching consequences.

So far, Turner has earned high marks from the White House and from Capitol Hill for what he has been doing. A key presidential aide said of Turner, "We work together very smoothly."

But within the intelligence establishment, the reaction to Turner is less enthusiastic. Although they seldom voice their complaints in his presence, some of the CIA's old hands grumble that Turner's ideas and methods threaten to wreck what they like to call the world's most effective intelligence organization.

"There are just one hell of a lot of people who are unsure of themselves, unsure of their future," said a former high-ranking CIA official who has maintained close ties with many of his colleagues. "There is a feeling over there that they are surviving day by day."

Some intelligence specialists are convinced that Turner can reburnish the CIA's tarnished reputation while focusing the agency's major efforts on the collection of information and deemphasizing clandestine political action.

But even these specialists say that, although Turner proved himself to be an innovator and an original thinker, in previous assignments, he lacks broad experience in intelligence gathering and has seldom had to tackle such a long-range project as reshaping the CIA.

Also, some present and former intelligence officials are skeptical about Turner's ability to stay within the law if he ever faces the type of crisis that recurrently plagued his predecessors: the White House demanding results

Stansfield Turner
Times photo

that the CIA finds it difficult to produce without breaking the rules.

In addition, Turner faces rivalry with the Defense Department over the direction of the total intelligence community. And he must contend with a CIA that has been demoralized for several years.

For his part, Turner shrugs off talk about CIA morale problems.

"Any time you make a change in a well-established bureaucratic institution, you meet resistance," he said. "I've been around large organizations long enough to know that if the junior officers weren't complaining in the ward room, I'd be concerned that they had lost their spunk."

Although most of the resistance centers on concern about basic policy questions, some of the problems stem from a peculiar chemical reaction between the four-star admiral and the civilian professional spies who are the backbone of the CIA.

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The CIA's ways are subtle, indirect, secretive and often devious. Turner's ways are direct, crisp and military.

"I don't like briefings," Turner said in describing his daily routine. "I can read faster than anybody can talk. Besides, anyone can be more precise if he puts it in writing."

The CIA, on the other hand, has a tradition of euphemism and understatement and a practice of not putting it in writing. An organization that once referred to assassination as "executive action" and sometimes conveyed instructions to agents with an arched eyebrow or a winked eye has a natural aversion to concise memos that might later prove troublesome.

Richard Bissell, once the CIA's chief of operations, told the Senate Intelligence Committee two years ago that he had informed Allen Dulles, then the CIA director, in guarded language about a plot to kill Cuban President Fidel Castro.

Words such as "murder" and "assassinate" were never spoken.

When asked by a senator why the agency officials talked "in riddles to one another," Bissell responded, "I think there was a reluctance to spread even on an oral record some of the aspects of this operation."

Turner has no patience with such considerations.

"I'm not one for the plausible deniability thing," Turner snapped. "I intend to know what goes on here."

A former CIA official, whose tenure overlapped Turner's, said that the admiral's demands to know what was going on had been taken as a sign of distrust by some agency professionals.

"A new man could come in and make changes—the community was ready for that. But he couldn't come in with a feeling of distrust of the people who were there," the former official said. "That is what Turner did. Turner sees things only in terms of black and white in a business that is entirely shades of gray."

An intelligence official in another agency said that Turner had irritated many CIA professionals by clinging to the Navy way of doing things.

"One got the impression that there was no great urge to help him," the official said.

Then there is the matter of Turner's personal background and style.

Although there are some exceptions to the rule, the CIA has traditionally been a stronghold of the Ivy League. Since 1966, every CIA director has been a graduate of an elite Eastern college.

In a way, Turner fits that pattern, but in other ways, he does not. Turner went to Amherst College in Massachusetts for two years, but then he shifted to Annapolis during the war year of 1943. After graduation from the Naval Academy, Turner was a Rhodes scholar at Oxford.

But after more than 30 years in the Navy, his impeccable blue pin-striped suits do not entirely fit in with the tweed suits and beards that contribute to the image of the CIA.

A 'consumer' of intelligence rather than a 'producer.'

Turner is the fourth military officer among the 10 men who have headed the CIA since it was created in 1947. But between the appointment of Allen Dulles as the agency's third director in 1953 and Turner's succession last March 9, the CIA director had been a civilian for all but 14 months.

Unlike the other admirals and generals who have led the CIA, Turner has never been involved directly in collecting military intelligence. Before his appointment, his only connection with intelligence had been to read the reports prepared for him as a high-ranking naval officer.

In the mercantile jargon of intelligence, he was a "consumer" rather than a "producer."

Sipping a glass of iced tea recently in his spacious office on the seventh floor of the CIA building, Turner conceded that he knew more about the substance of intelligence than he did about the methods of obtaining it.

"I can tell a bad estimate from a good one a lot quicker than I can tell a bad collection plan from a good one," he said.

President Carter chose Turner to be CIA chief after his first choice, Theodore C. Sorensen, withdrew when it became clear that his Senate confirmation was unlikely. At the time, Turner was commander-in-chief of NATO forces in Southern Europe, with headquarters in Naples, Italy.

Long before his NATO assignment, however, Turner had established a reputation in the Navy as an intellectual and an innovator. Few naval colleagues, it seems, have neutral opinions about him.

He is either respected for his intellect or disdained for his ego.

Much of the Turner legend was made on a late summer morning in 1972, when Turner, then a vice admiral, addressed his first convocation as president of the Naval War College at Newport, R.I.

Clad in an academic gown instead of a Navy uniform, Turner told the students—mostly Navy commanders, with a few lieutenant colonels from the other services—that times were changing at the college, which had offered occasional lectures to break up the rounds of golf and afternoons of sailing.

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Capt. Jack White, a member of Turner's staff at Newport, recalls that Turner said he was instituting tests, grades and serious classroom work.

Turner concluded the speech, White said, by noting that it was then about noon. He suggested that the students have a good lunch because at 1:30 p.m. classes would begin on the Peloponnesian War, the Athens-Sparta conflict between 431 and 404 BC in which naval power was used in support of ground troops for the first time.

"You could have heard a pin drop," White said. "All you heard was the breeze flapping off the bay. In the beginning there was a lot of grumbling at the cocktail hour. But by the end of the year, I would say that 95% of the class was thoroughly in favor of Stan's ideas."

Turner has maintained that flair for memorable gestures. A veteran middle-level CIA bureaucrat recalls that Turner recently clapped him on the arm and called him by name during a chance meeting in front of the agency's headquarters. The employe said that none of the other CIA directors he had worked for ever did that.

Similarly, during his assignment to the NATO post in Naples, Turner learned enough Italian to make speeches in that language. Previous American commanders had not done so.

A former Navy colleague said that Turner played bureaucratic politics like a grand master played chess, always thinking several moves ahead.

"Stan has never been inclined to accept with open arms anything that he inherits," the retired admiral said. "He thinks he must be able to improve on whatever he receives. He has a disruptive way of getting where he wants to go. This has given him a great reputation as an innovator."

But a former top-level CIA official suggested that in the Navy Turner always moved on to a new assignment before his innovations had a chance to mature.

This official was skeptical about Turner's ability to maintain his momentum over the long run. Turner has said he expects to serve at least four years at the CIA.

Turner may have more power at the CIA, both real and theoretical, than did any of his predecessors, however. As a classmate of Carter at the Naval Academy, Turner enjoys what may be the closest relationship between a CIA director and a President since Allen Dulles served Dwight D. Eisenhower in the 1950s. Even Turner's detractors concede that his access to Carter makes him a formidable individual within the Administration.

On paper, at least, Turner has a broader mandate than any of his predecessors. Last August, Carter issued an executive order giving the CIA director a measure of control over the budgets of the other agencies in the "intelligence community," a semiformal grouping that includes the National Security Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency and the intelligence arms of each of the armed services.

The CIA director has always been considered the titular head of the intelligence community. But before Carter's executive order, the director had little leverage in dealing with the other agencies, all part of the Defense Department.

Turner had sought much more control over the other agencies than he eventually received—but even the compromise Carter imposed gave Turner an extraordinarily broad charter.

For the future, Turner said that his CIA would concentrate on collecting information and would deemphasize the secrecy that always had characterized intelligence operations.

He said the agency would declassify and publish its reports whenever that could be done without damaging the national interest. In that way, Turner said, the CIA can give the public a greater return on the money the government spends for intelligence.