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Bush's years at CIA draw mixed review

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Improved morale,
but he avoided
tough decisions

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WASHINGTON — As director of the Central Intelligence Agency, his only independent executive post in the government, George Bush proved himself adept at dealing with Congress and staff members, but less adroit at choosing aides and making certain tough decisions.

That is the verdict of people who watched Bush at close hand during his 356 days as CIA chief in 1976.

To his supporters, he buoyed agency morale in the wake of congressional disclosures of misconduct, improved relations with Congress and exercised a canny pragmatism that bridged differences within the agency.

To his detractors, Bush selected buddies as lieutenants, ducked ticklish personnel decisions and allowed hard-line conservatives to shape the agency's traditionally independent assessment of Soviet capabilities.

With polls showing him ahead of Democrat Michael Dukakis in the race for the White House, Bush's performance as CIA chief executive is being examined for insights into the nature of a Bush presidency. He himself once described the CIA directorship as "the best job in Washington."

"As a manager and leader, he was extremely successful," said Ray Cline, an intelligence specialist at the CIA and the State Department for 30 years. He also served as an "informal consultant" for Bush at the CIA. "He didn't stay very long, so I wouldn't overdo it, but he certainly improved the quality of estimates and the morale of the agency."

A different view emerges from Carl Duckett, the CIA's deputy for science and technology who was let go by Bush after three months. "I never saw George feel he had to understand the depth of something," Duckett said in a Washington Post interview.

"He goes with the flow, looking for how it will play politically."

Ford's nominee

Bush, a former Texas congressman, was President Richard Nixon's ambassador to the United Nations, chairman of the Republican National Committee and U.S. envoy to China before President Ford nominated him as CIA director Nov. 3, 1975.

Bush took over at agency headquarters in Langley, Va., at a critical time. The agency was involved in a furor after reports on Capitol Hill that it had conducted unauthorized surveillance of U.S. citizens, mounted assassination plots against foreign leaders and staged

other questionable covert activities in the Nixon years.

Nixon even sought to use the CIA as part of his attempt to cover up political espionage in the Watergate scandal.

CIA Director William Colby, a career professional, finally was forced to step down.

Bush quickly endeared himself to the agency's estimated 15,000 employees by taking their side.

"About three days after he got there, he read some (critical) story in the paper and turned to his associates and said, 'What are they doing to us?'" Colby recalled. "Us! Us! He had the place in the palm of his hand from then on."

Bush deepened agency loyalty with attempts to resist Justice Department requests for documents detailing the role of former CIA chief Richard Helms in the 1973 overthrow of a democratically elected Marxist government in Chile.

Its new chief's almost nonstop appearances on Capitol Hill helped restore the CIA's relations with Congress.

"He really tried to work hard with Congress," said Donald Gregg, a Bush aide at the CIA who is now his special assistant for national security affairs.

Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Oversight Committee, paid tribute to Bush when he resigned to clear

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the way for President-elect Jimmy Carter's CIA director, Stansfield Turner.

"You might say Bush was one of the best we had," Inouye said at the time. "The morale of the intelligence community has been inspired by Bush's leadership."

Questions about personnel

Beyond repairing the CIA, Bush added \$500 million to the technological intelligence budget, a move that led to better spy satellite photography in later administrations.

But his record at the CIA was marked by personnel problems. Insiders complained that his choice of deputies reflected preference for aides with whom he felt personally comfortable instead of tough-minded lieutenants who would challenge the status quo. At least two major Bush appointees were said to be "in over their heads."

Turner, the four-star Navy admiral who succeeded Bush, complained that senior CIA officials provided a "disturbing lack of specificity and clarity in response to my questions" and that briefing books were "too long and detailed to be useful."

Nor did Bush tackle the tough personnel cutbacks. Internal CIA studies recommended such trims in order to streamline the agency after the Vietnam War and to trim its budget, then estimated at \$1 billion a year. (The agency now employs an estimated 25,000 people worldwide with a budget estimated to range as high as \$5 billion a year.)

For instance, the espionage branch recommended that Bush cut 1,350 jobs within that division over five years. Yet Turner said

that when he took over, "no action had been taken."

Critics also note that Bush took no action against CIA employees who had helped former CIA agent Edwin Wilson. Wilson was convicted of crimes in arranging arms shipments to Libya.

Nor did Bush remove from the CIA payroll Jordan's King Hussein, despite a recommendation by the agency's general counsel that Hussein's \$750,000 secret retainer be suspended.

Team A, Team B

By far the most controversial Bush legacy at the CIA was the alleged "politicization" of its traditionally independent assessments of Soviet capabilities.

In what became known as the "Team A, Team B" approach, Bush invited a panel of conservatives, led by Harvard history Professor Richard Pipes, to challenge CIA analyses of intelligence on Soviet military strength.

Bush subsequently adopted features of the outsiders' stark assessment — in effect doubling CIA estimates of the share of the Soviet economy devoted to defense. That appraisal, substantiated by additional CIA intelligence, helped justify the buildup of U.S. nuclear forces under Presidents Carter and Reagan.

Cline, the former CIA analyst, called the study "realistic," but added, "From the point of view of technique, it left something to be desired."

The "B-team" practice was ended shortly thereafter by Turner, who said, "Pitting extremists against one another can only lead to poor results."

After being rebuffed in his offer to stay on for the first few months of the Carter administration, Bush left Jan. 20, 1977, Inauguration Day.

Later he returned to the agency as a private citizen for a visit. When he entered the executive dining room, a waiter told him that kitchen workers would like to see him. Bush greeted each one by name, and an aide recalled, "That kind of personal touch is still revered there."