

CIA's openness called a 'myth'

UK professor says review unit 'used'

By TIM WEINER
The New York Times

WASHINGTON — The CIA's years-old promises to release records on its most famous covert operations of the Cold War are merely "a brilliant public relations snow job" and "a carefully nurtured myth," says a historian who helped

declassify CIA documents for six years.

The historian, George Herring, a professor at the University of Kentucky, wrote in a newsletter that he believes he and other members of the declassification group were "used" to create the impression the agency was serious about fulfilling promises of openness made since 1992 by three successive CIA directors.

Herring served on the Historical Review Panel from its inception in 1990 until 1996. But in the May

newsletter of the Organization of American Historians, and in a subsequent interview, he maintained that little had changed in the five years since then. CIA Director Robert Gates said in a speech that "the results of our historical review program have been quite meager. The consequences of low priority, few resources and rigid agency policies and procedures heavily biased toward denial of declassification."

See UK
Page 10, col. 1, this section

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UK historian says CIA's openness is a myth

Continued from Page One

Gates said then that the agency's files on its three most famous Cold-War covert operations — the 1961 Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba, the coup against the elected government of Guatemala in 1954 and the 1953 coup that installed the shah of Iran — would be released in the not-100-distant future.

BUT NONE of the files have been made public, although a CIA official said Monday that a portion of those on the Guatemala operation would be released in a matter of days.

Nor has the agency fulfilled a promise made in September 1993 by Gates' successor, James Woolsey, who pledged to open records — "warts and all" — not only on those three operations but also on eight others, including missions in Indonesia, Laos and Tibet.

"There are people in the agency who would like to live up to those promises, but they don't have the clout or the wherewithal to do so," said Herring, who called his experience "enormously frustrating."

Herring said declassification as a whole had been "excruciatingly slow, and the volume of documents released certainly did not live up to our expectations of the meaning of openness."

The panel, which "met at the whim of the agency," did not meet at all between August 1990 and June 1994.

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UK professor George Herring, who served on the Historical Review Panel

he said, and was "used as window dressing" to enhance the CIA's image.

"The agency had done such a brilliant public relations snow job," he said, that it convinced many historians that it really was "moving toward openness, a carefully nurtured myth that was not at all easy for me to dispel."

IN RESPONSE, Brian Latell, director of the CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence, said in an interview Monday that some, although not all, of the Guatemala files would shortly be made public at the National Archives. Some 1,400 pages of CIA operational records — the first concerning a covert operation that the agency has ever voluntarily made public — are to be made available, along with 300 tapes of propaganda broadcasts that were never classified to begin with.

Latell, who oversees the declassification of records and publishes

scholarly historical papers under the CIA's auspices, said the agency was "very serious about openness," but had to be meticulous in releasing old secrets.

"This is very challenging work," he said. "We have to be painstaking. We have to have double and triple checks to be absolutely certain we are not compromising valuable sources and methods, even when the records are 40 or 50 years old."

"And that's why it takes so long. We don't want to release something that's going to create a problem for some brave source. We can't unilaterally release information that would reflect on another government. There are also very complicated foreign-policy sensitivities."

HERRING NOTED, and CIA officers confirmed, that the agency had spent a great deal of time in declassification work on the agency's Foreign Broadcast Information Service, which monitors overseas news re-

ports, although those records were never secret in the first place.

But Latell said that in the last five years the CIA had released about 12,000 pages of its internal records for the State Department's official histories, as well as more than 400 intelligence analyses on the Soviet Union and nearly 250,000 pages pertaining to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

He also said that covert-operations files from the Bay of Pigs venture might be released later this year.

"We feel that we're fulfilling the openness commitment" made by Gates and his successors, Latell said.

Herring, who has studied U.S. foreign relations for more than 30 years, was one of two UK history professors to win a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship last month. He will spend the next year working on a book about U.S. foreign relations from the American Revolution to the present.

Herring came to UK in 1969, four years after earning his doctorate from the University of Virginia. He has written five books, including three on the Vietnam War and one each on U.S. involvement in Central America and the Cold War. He has also edited the diaries of Edward R. Stearns Jr., who served as secretary of state under Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman.