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The Washington Merry-go-round

F. Peak
6/12/80

*Does CIA earn its keep?
An ex-CIA agent says no*



WASHINGTON — Defenders of the Central Intelligence Agency have always responded to exposure of the agency's illegal activities and operational failures by stressing the importance to U.S. policy-makers of accurate information about what's happening in the world.

But now an authoritative CIA critic — a respected employee who served 25 years in the agency — has challenged the very heart of the CIA's justification for existence. In a nutshell, he says the CIA does a rotten job of intelligence-gathering.

The former agent, Ralph McGehee, has set down his disturbing critique in a book-length manuscript, and expanded on his views in an interview with my associate Dale Van Atta.

The CIA's primary function, McGehee concluded, is to provide "information" that supports the preconceived notions of an administration's top policy-makers — in other words, to tell a president and his advisers what they want to hear. This, of course, is worse than no intelligence at all, since it reinforces wrongheaded assumptions while suppressing accurate information that conflicts with the prevailing policy views.

The results can be disastrous for the United States — as in the cases of Vietnam and Iran, where the CIA systematically exaggerated the strength and popularity of the South Vietnamese government and the shah while minimizing that of their opponents.

Citing a personal example, McGehee told of his success with a low-cost, non-violent anti-communist program he directed in Thailand in 1967. His well trained, 25-man Thai task force was able, by peaceful persuasion, to turn the pro-communist natives of one province completely around.

The program was discontinued by the top CIA brass, McGehee says, because it belied their view that the Thais were basically pro-American, but were being terrorized by at most 4,000 communist guerrillas. Yet McGehee had found at least that many in a single province, plus widespread support among the population — and had thwarted the communists without resort to heavyhanded counter-insurgency measures in vogue at headquarters.

By contrast, McGehee told of a colleague in Thailand who claimed to have subverted a Communist Party official, and sent back glowing reports of disruptive activities within the party. The agent was given a medal and promotion. But his successor in the post found that

the operation had been largely imaginary; the Thai defector had been lying. Nevertheless, the agent eventually became chief of personnel for the East Asia division, McGehee said.

"Ours was not an operation to produce intelligence," McGehee has reluctantly concluded. "Instead we produced only that information necessary to support CIA goals, operations and illusions." The CIA, he said, "is potential ruin lurking in a state of suspended animation."

FISCAL FROWN: With a stubborn set to his jaw, President Carter has told aides he won't abandon his balanced budget.

He is under pressure to increase social spending and cut taxes as first aid for the nation's economic pains. The president has agreed to divert more money to help the poor and unemployed cope with the recession. But he will try to squeeze the money out of the military budget.

Aides have also argued that Americans, whose pocketbooks are sorely pinched, should be granted enough tax relief at least to offset the Social Security tax increase. The president's economic advisers have also urged him to give businessmen a tax break to stimulate production.

But Carter has instructed his subordinates not even to discuss a tax cut in public until the 1981 budget is safely balanced.

ARAB LOBBY: The Palestine Liberation Organization, no slouch itself at the lobbying game, has a new ally on Capitol Hill. The Parliamentary Association for Euro-Arab Cooperation, as it calls itself, is made up of European legislators who favor the Arab cause.

In a letter to a number of chosen

members of Congress, Dennis Walters, a British MP who is co-chairman of the association, stressed "the vital importance for all Western countries of united support for the principle of Palestinian self-determination." The letter complained that if the European nations follow the U.S. government's lead in the Middle East, "we are plunged into contradictions."

POCKETED PEN: When the president signs a bill into law, the sponsoring agency or member of Congress traditionally is given the pen (or pens) used in the signing. So last April, when President Carter signed the General Accounting Act of 1980, he turned the pen over to Comptroller General Elmer Staats.

The General Accounting Office archivist asked for the mildly historic pen, but Staats, who is retiring this year, said he wanted to keep it himself. The GAO's request for another pen was rejected by the White House, which said the supply of pens is running low.

ANGEL DUSTERS? The notorious West Coast-based motorcycle gang, Hell's Angels, have extended their operations from low-grade hoodlumism to high-powered crime, according to federal investigators. The black-leather-jacket set has become a big-time manufacturer of "speed" and other illegal drugs, say law enforcement authorities.

With the violence characteristic of their past history, the cycle gangsters are reportedly engaged in a campaign of terror designed to eliminate "weak" members and other witnesses who might turn state's evidence in forthcoming trials.

United Feature Syndicate Inc.