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Intelligence-Gathering: Can the CIA Know It All?

The almost weekly revelations of the House Intelligence Committee that the CIA failed to predict this coup or that war are titillating but ultimately misleading.

The premise on which these revelations are offered is that the CIA should have known: the agency goofed in its primary mission of intelligence-gathering. This premise both overstates the capabilities of intelligence and understates the complexities of international reality. Of course there is good intelligence and bad intelligence. But to expect that an American intelligence agency can have precise foreknowledge of sudden, secretly planned acts of violence in foreign lands—acts which regularly surprise their direct victims—is absurd.

director of Military Intelligence and now its man at the United Nations.

Complacent and arrogant after its swift victory in 1967, Israel overlooked the political frustration pointing a desperate Egypt toward war; discounted Sadat's public statements that he was getting "everything" from the Russians and mobilizing "for the resumption of the battle"; failed to link Saudi Arabia's decision to wield the oil weapon with the Egyptian-Syrian military buildup; mistook Syria's early 1973 quiet as the result of Israeli retaliatory strikes; and so on.

Herzog strongly suggests that Israel was taken in by phony leaked reports that negligent Egyptian maintenance and the

bluffing. The chief of staff felt maybe he wasn't bluffing. When no attack came, the intelligence people felt vindicated. So in September they tended to figure Sadat was bluffing again.

The seizure of some Soviet Jews by Palestinians in Austria on Sept. 29 distracted many Israelis. Maybe it was planned as a diversion, Herzog thinks.

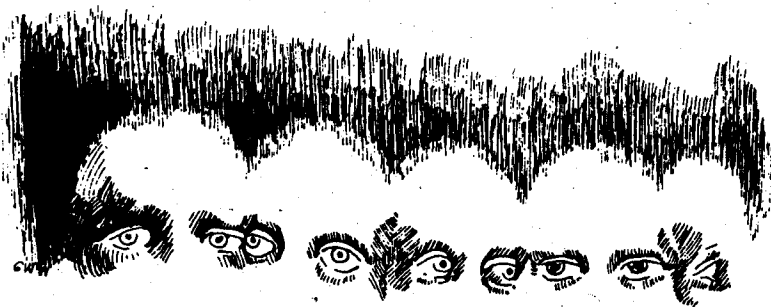
A lieutenant in intelligence read the Suez scene on Oct. 1 and saw a war coming but his warning did not get passed up the chain. The chief navy intelligence officer expressed the same view at the same time but "his appreciation was not accepted by GHQ."

Henry Kissinger told Abba Eban on Oct. 4 that "nothing dramatic can happen in October."

Egyptian soldiers continued to fish the canal and walk about without helmets.

Seeing planes flying toward Israeli lines at 2 p.m. on Oct. 6, an Egyptian colonel turned to a colleague and said, "What's all this about?"

I conclude that no country's intelligence service can be counted on invariably to pierce the double barrier of its own preconceptions and the adversary's deceptions. The Israeli record ought to induce some humility in us all.



By G. Waller for The Washington Post

It is wishful thinking to imagine that we can effectively foretell the course of future violence. We are not the world's policemen, nor its prophets.

I wish that the House committee, instead of simply asking whether the agency accomplished one impossible task in one rather small corner of its work, had made an in-depth case study or two to illuminate the real problems and potentialities of intelligence-gathering.

Just such a study, of Israel's disastrous intelligence performance in the period leading up to the 1973 Mideast war, has been made public. It's in "The War of Atonement—October, 1973," a new book by Maj. Gen. Chaim Herzog, twice Israel's

exodus of Soviet technicians had destroyed the Egyptian missile force. Egypt carefully nourished, he says, the then-prevailing Israeli views that Egyptian-Soviet relations were deteriorating; that the technological and cultural gap between Egypt and Israel was growing; and that Arab leadership was unfit to decide to attack.

From January 1973 onward, Egypt mobilized reservists for training 20 times—to establish a lulling rhythm. At the end of September it mobilized three classes of reservists, saying they would be demobilized on Oct. 8. (The war was to begin Oct. 6). "As opposed to previous occasions—and this was noted in Israel—the civil defense organizations in Egypt and Syria were not activated, and again, as opposed to previous occasions, no atmosphere of imminent war was created."

Egypt's major mobilization of September, ostensibly for a canal-crossing exercise, was its fourth of Sadat's tenure. At the third the previous spring, Israeli intelligence had figured he was just