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Terminating the CIA

Pat Moynihan has a candidate he is pushing for Bill Clinton's consideration for CIA director: Nobody.

The Democratic senator from New York hinted at his choice in a report he sent to the president-elect about Bosnia, which he visited over Thanksgiving. Yugoslavia is another former country that Moynihan thinks the agency misread—by completely missing the ethnic ferocity that is causing slaughter and famine.

He wants the agency shut down and its functions folded into the State Department, not just because it was a creation of the Cold War that has outlived what little usefulness he thinks it had. It is because on the central question of the Cold War era, the spooks got it dead wrong and caused us to misspend ourselves into bankruptcy competing with a pauper nation.

Moynihan may have a better chance of convincing Bill Clinton to trim CIA and stuff it into State than he has of convincing his colleagues in the Senate. His recent attempt to give a semblance of democracy to the secrets factory—he wanted to publish its budget—lost badly. Democrats have not yet cast out their fear of seeming “soft” on national security; and Republicans, who hate all government with a great passion, become passionately protective when cloak and dagger are in danger. Clinton, at least, is anxious to save money. “He could get about \$5 billion if he closed it down,” says Moynihan, “and not a drop of blood on the floor.”

Some senators, notably the current chairman of the intelligence committee, are starry-eyed about “The Company.” David L. Boren (D-Okla.) earnestly believes that the CIA is serious about “reform.” He lobbied vigorously for the confirmation of the present director, Robert M. Gates, from an almost childlike conviction that Gates wished to democratize the agency and would confide in his so-called overseers in Congress. “I know,” Boren would say to doubters, “because he has told us so much, even things he didn’t have to tell us.”

Recently, Boren has undergone a conversion. Gates failed to share his information about the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro, the state-owned Italian giant and its little Atlanta branch, that provided the funds for loans to Iraq, and the burgeoning scandal about our generous financing of Saddam Hussein’s war machine. As it happened, the CIA

got it right about what was going on in Rome, but when challenged by the Justice Department, which is prosecuting on different theory, it obligingly revised its information and did not tell all it knew to a federal judge. Boren has now joined in the hue and cry for an independent counsel.

But Moynihan does not discuss such transgressions when he presses his idea of eliminating “with extreme prejudice”—CIA’s phrase for offing someone who thwarts its purpose. He does not recite the catalogue of crimes committed by the agency when it was being identified in the late Sen. Frank Church’s 1976 exposé as “a rogue elephant.” The forbidden domestic spying during Watergate, the infamous LSD experiments on unwitting subjects, the subversion of the Chilean government, the assassinations, to some Americans hardly reflect our values.

Moynihan, the most scholarly senator, is a social scientist, and he knows about taking the measurements that the agency got so wrong for so long. In 1979, without the aid of satellites or any other sophisticated intelligence-gathering equipment, he figured out that the Soviet Union was headed for extinction.

He credits a “modest” employee of the Census Bureau, one Murray Feshbach, who in a forest of statistics found the tree that mattered: the life expectancy for Soviet males was dropping. This should not be happening in a country whose growth rate was routinely cited by CIA as on a par with that of Italy and Japan. In one of their most egregious bloopers, they figured that the per capita income in East Germany was higher than West Germany’s.

“The agency was so wedded to the notion of the Soviet Union as a successful state, that they couldn’t absorb other ideas or realities,” Moynihan says.

Stansfield Turner, Jimmy Carter’s CIA director, has admitted the hugely wrong estimates; but Gates and the others now in charge are incapable of saying “Boy, did we ever get it wrong.” Moynihan notes “revisionist rumblings” from Langley to the effect that they had it right all along. It has to have been their best-kept secret.

Why does Congress put up with such ruinously expensive incompetence and, year after year, increase the CIA’s secret budget?

Moynihan sighs. “It’s the cachet of knowing things that other people don’t know—even when they’re wrong.”