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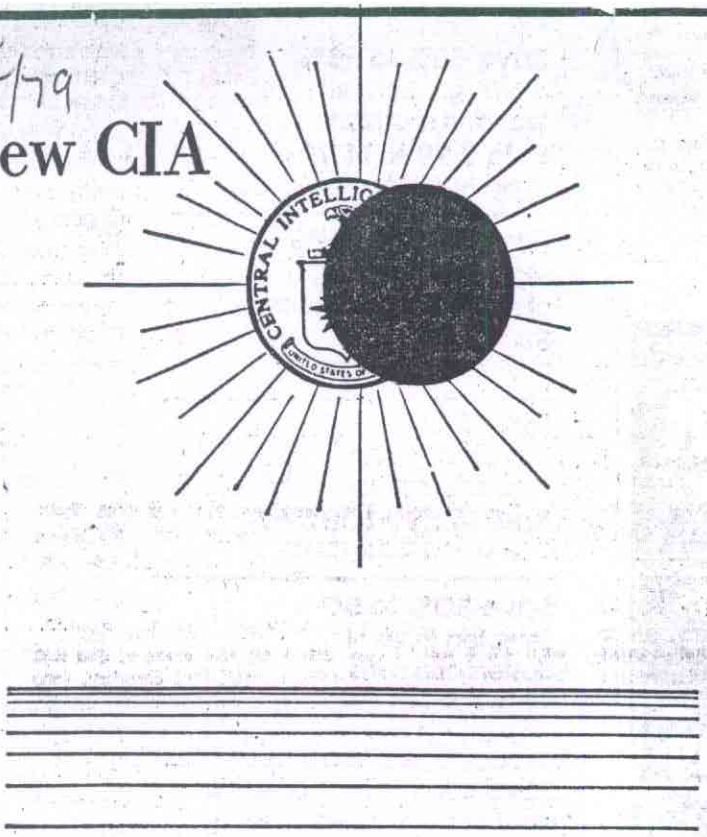
The Sane, New CIA



By Arnoldo Franchioni for The Washington Post

Two recent episodes strike me as indication that, under the much-abused Adm. Stansfield Turner, the Central Intelligence Agency is developing new sanity and flexibility about intelligence in the era of détente.

One episode concerns China. The quest for intelligence on the ground behind the Great Wall has been a source of enormous frustration to the CIA. Spies would be parachuted onto the mainland, only to end up in Mao's prisons. When official American-Chinese exchanges started, the agency seized the opportunity to infiltrate its agents, under various covers, into U.S. delegations.

Recently, the agency ran into a roadblock trying to send an officer with a delegation led by then-HEW Secretary Joseph Califano. Califano, fearing that his good-will trip would be compromised, refused to accept the CIA agent unless he was specifically identified as such and okayed by the Peking regime.

Sending an intelligence officer on an overt mission to a Communist country seemed a mind-blowing idea. But, after some agonizing, the agency agreed. And so it was that Robert A. Phillips, a young Harvard-trained, Chinese-speaking economic analyst, went along, identified in the official roster as representing the "National Foreign Assessment Center (CIA)." Unobtrusive, friendly and helpful with background, he was on good terms with U.S. health and education officials, the large American press contingent and apparently with the bemused Chinese.

John LeCarré would have savored the moment when Chinese Minister of Health Qian Xinzhong raised his glass to Phillips at a farewell dinner and expressed hope that he had learned what he wanted to find out. A CIA spokesman told me there is no intention of making overt missions a general practice. But, that such a thing happened at all betokens a fresh approach to intelligence-gathering.

The other episode concerns Fidel Castro, the CIA's grand obsession. Through half of its three decades, the agency devoted major efforts to harassing his regime, trying to unseat him, and attempting—in one phase with Mafia help—to arrange his assassination.

The disastrous Bay of Pigs operation in 1961 cost the agency its top leadership and came close to destroying the agency. Yet, on Nov. 22, 1963, the day of President Kennedy's assassination, a CIA agent was meeting in Paris with a Cuban, hatching one more of the multiple Castro assassination plots.

So deep were the scars of the CIA's long and abortive war against Cuba that, for years, it was a subject that agency officers could hardly discuss rationally.

That now apparently has changed, judging by a recent CIA document appraising Cuban involvement in Nicaragua. The memorandum, written last May, is not only secret, but specially compartmented with notations like "NOFORN," meaning no foreign distribution; "NOCONTRACT," meaning no copies to outside contractors, and "ORCON," signifying "originator-controlled," unavailable to anyone not approved by the officer who wrote it.

That restriction, manifestly, was not fully observed by some authorized recipients. The point, however, is not that the memo was leaked, but that, because of its balanced approach, it could be leaked for conflicting purposes.

First, the Chicago Tribune headlined "Cuban Comeback in the Caribbean" and, quoting extensively from the secret memo, painted a picture of Castro's menacing penetration. Remarkably, the same document then was leaked to The New York Times, which headlined "U.S. Study Says Cuba Plays Cautious Role in Nicaragua." Then, as though to correct that, Times columnist William Safire, citing the same memo, warned of "a Moscow-Havana takeover of Latin America."

With the original document in hand, I am willing to attest that all the previous leakees had a basis for their judgments. The 10 closely typed pages detail Cuban arms supplies to the Sandinistas through Panama and Costa Rica, and the training of guerrillas. The memo also describes efforts to restrain the Sandinistas from frontal attack, and Castro's generally "low-key approach" to the Nicaraguan situation.

It is, in short, a hearteningly measured and unhysterical intelligence report about an issue that is not only currently touchy, but historically traumatic to the CIA.

Indeed, judging from the document, President Somoza's departure came earlier than Castro had anticipated. Castro had expected that Somoza would not be toppled before the end of his term in 1981.

The report concludes that Havana's approach to events in Central America "reflects a far more sophisticated and selective revolutionary doctrine than that which guided Cuba's action in the 1960s."

My compliments to the CIA, whose approach to Castro seems much more sophisticated than that which guided the agency's actions in the 1960s.