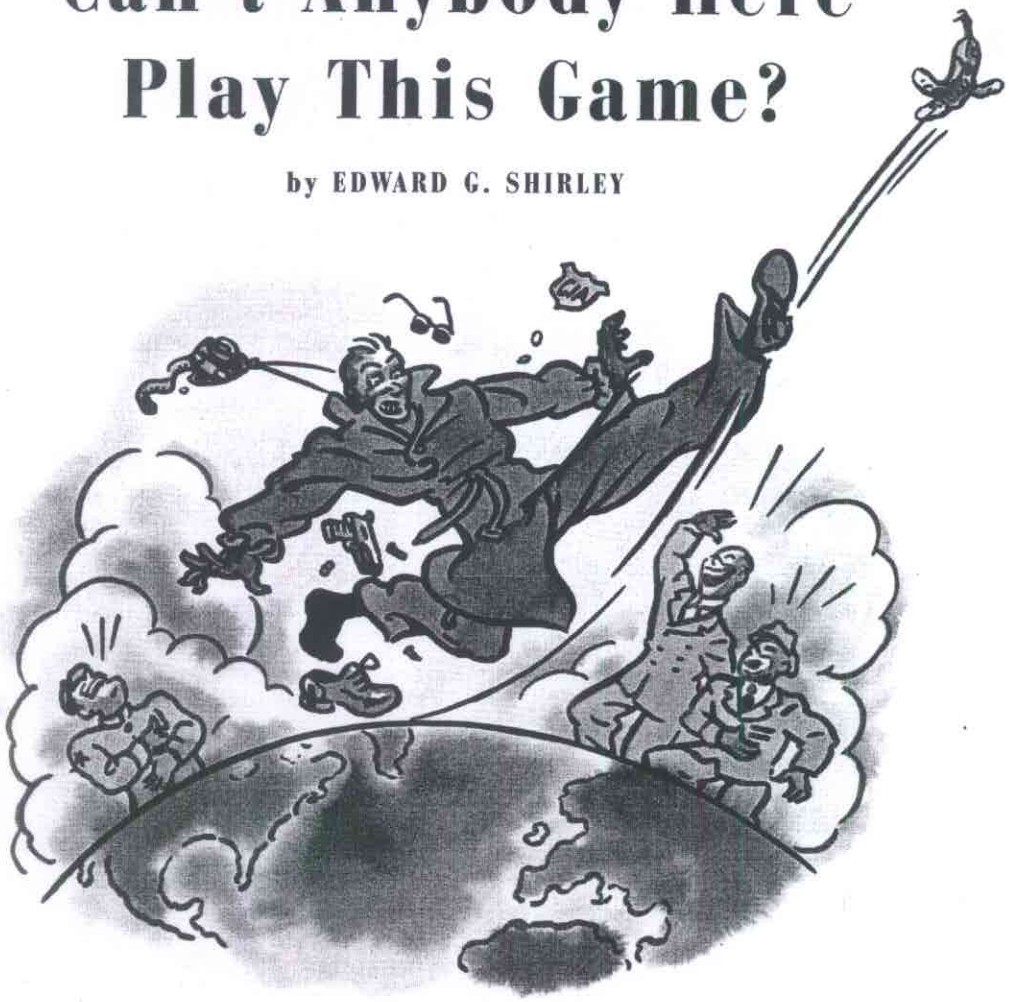
Can't Anybody Here Play This Game?

by EDWARD G. SHIRLEY



The sensational revelations of recent years about the Central Intelligence Agency almost obscure a larger point: the Agency is just no good at what it's supposed to be doing. So writes the author, a former CIA officer, who describes a corrosive culture in which promotion-hungry operatives collect pointless intelligence from worthless foreign agents. Reform, the author warns, may prove impossible

THE arrest of Aldrich Hazen Ames, a CIA operative turned KGB mole, in February of 1994, fundamentally changed the public perception of the clandestine service of the Central Intelligence Agency. Before Ames only "case officers," operatives who recruit and run foreign agents, knew how dysfunctional the service had become. Since Ames the outside world has learned that much is rotten in the Directorate of Operations—the official name of the clandestine service, known to insiders simply as the DO. Yet the senators and congressmen who oversee the DO, the journalists who report on it, and the civilian directors who run it have failed to understand and to confront the service's real problems. Even among CIA analysts who work in the Directorate of Intelligence, the overt, think-tank side of the house, few have grasped the extent of the DO's decrepitude.

Illustrations by Ross MacDonald

Politically charged, usually lurid stories of CIA misconduct have deflected attention from telling questions about U.S. intelligence. Journalists level charges of Agency involvement in Latino drug-smuggling rings. The American wife of a Central American guerrilla accuses the DO of complicity in torture and murder. Female case officers sue their male bosses for sexual discrimination.

All these affairs have blackened the Agency's image. None advances the debate on whether the clandestine service actually spies well. Protected by secrecy, by a disciplined and obedient bureaucracy, and by the average outsider's basic ignorance of and fascination with espionage, the leadership of the DO has pre-empted and stalled pressure for Agency reform.

In 1985 I joined the Directorate of Operations. A devout cold warrior, I had no qualms about espionage or covert action against the Soviet Union and in defense of America's national interests. I was proud and eager when the Near East Division chose me to join its ranks. I had dreamed for years of applying my academic training in Islamic history to the DO's Middle Eastern mission.

Twelve years later I retain an appreciation for espionage—for those rare moments when a case officer contributes to his nation's defense. But I have long since lost my pride in the DO, which has evolved into a sorry blend of Monty Python and Big Brother. I resigned in 1993.

When current and former case officers gather, their conversations inevitably converge: they wonder whether the DO has irretrievably fallen apart. A few years ago I asked a former colleague who had served in Moscow whether she had ever successfully explained the DO's problems to an outsider. "No, never," she replied. "I've given up trying. You have to explain so much you get lost in the details, or you just sound like a whiny, unpatriotic left-winger."

The CIA, with a certain fanfare, recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. The Agency wants the American public, and especially Congress, to believe that its men and women won the Cold War, along the way had a few problems, and yet are now rising to the challenges of the twenty-first century. In front of the intelligence-oversight committees in Congress senior Agency officials repeat the CIA's new mission statement about battling terrorism, drugs, the proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, and rogue regimes in Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, and North Korea. With the Ames fiasco receding, some current and retired CIA officials are asserting that if Congress and the press would only back off, the professionals would once again get the job done.

One feature of a closed society is that it lies to itself as readily as it lies to outsiders. Writing as "X" in his 1947 assessment of the Soviet Union, the diplomat George F. Kennan borrowed from Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; the passage applies equally to the CIA's present-day Directorate of Operations.

> From enthusiasm to imposture the step is perilous and slippery; the demon of Socrates affords a memorable instance of how a wise man may deceive himself, how a good man may deceive others, how the conscience may slumber in a mixed and middle state between self-illusion and voluntary fraud.

The sad truth about the CIA—what the Ames debacle didn't reveal—is that the DO has for years been running an espionage charade in most countries, deceiving itself and others about the value of its recruited agents and intelligence production. The ugliest DO secret is how the clandestine service encourages decent case officers, gradually and naturally, to evolve into liars about their contribution to America's security. By 1985, the year Ames volunteered to spy for the KGB, the vast majority of the CIA's foreign agents were mediocre assets at best, put on the payroll because case officers needed high recruitment numbers to get promoted. Long before the Soviet Union collapsed, recruitment and intelligence fraud—the natural product of an insular spy world—had stripped the DO of its integrity and its competence.

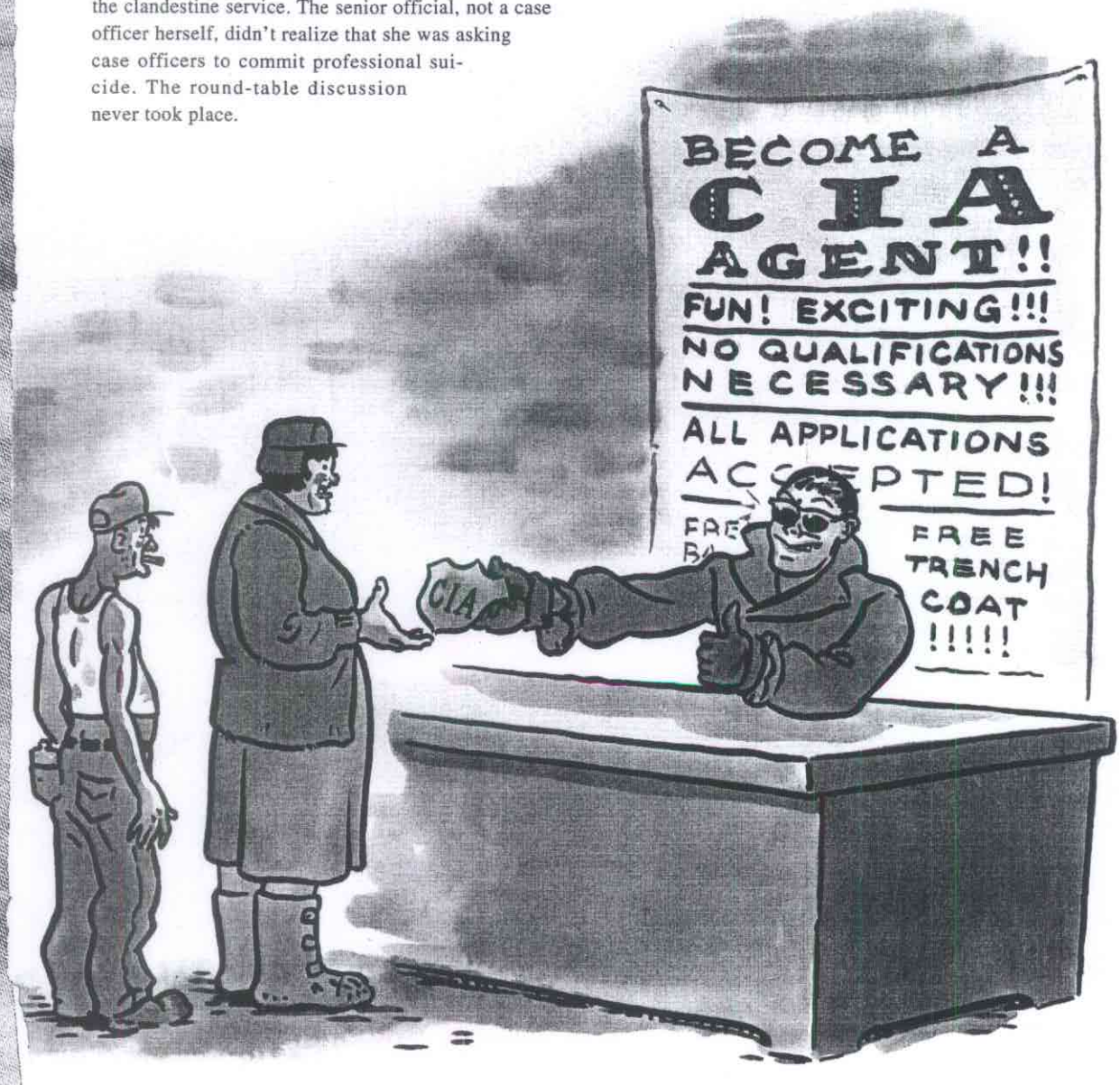
Younger operatives are resigning in droves, because they have given up hope of reform. The attrition was sufficient to provoke an investigation by the inspector general in 1996. Though the inspector general's office did a poor job of questioning young case officers who had resigned, the final report doesn't deny the increasing resignation rate among the best and the brightest who entered the DO during the Reagan years. Nearly three quarters of the case officers from my 1985 junior-officer class have quit the service. When my class entered, we were told that the DO had the lowest attrition rate—under five percent—in the U.S. government. Though this figure was no doubt inaccurate—a normal and healthy rate of attrition in any bureaucracy should be higher—it does reflect the DO's

credo that officers don't quit the clandestine service unless *they* are flawed. Within the DO and in front of Congress senior officials downplay the rising resignation rate and even deny that the directorate's younger officers—let alone its best ones—are abandoning ship.

But the senior officers themselves know the truth. As early as 1988 a senior CIA official responsible for the Directorate of Operations' budget and personnel visited stations and bases worldwide, discreetly asking young case officers why so many good young officers were quitting. The official wanted to know whether junior officers would be willing to participate in a round-table discussion with the deputy director of operations, the boss of the clandestine service. The senior official, not a case officer herself, didn't realize that she was asking case officers to commit professional suicide. The round-table discussion never took place.

A Dysfunctional Family

AMERICANS were shocked by the DO's nine-year failure to catch Ames, a hard-drinking, free-spending KGB mole inside the Soviet–East Europe Division. How could the DO have entrusted its premier agents—probably the best Soviet agents the CIA ever had—to a counterintelligence case officer with such evident flaws? Unlike the usual agent chaff that case officers recruit in order to get promotions, these Soviet agents were the real thing. Treason and his spending habits aside, the truth is that Ames was not



much different from many of his peers. He was disgruntled and he drank too much. He disliked recruiting foreign agents and he did it poorly. He distrusted most of his colleagues, particularly those more senior. He was stalled in his career as a mid-level officer (a GS-14), slightly higher in grade than the average retiring case officer.

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union moving in the cocktail-party circuit was the primary, often the only, way a case officer could rub shoulders with Communist "hard targets"—foreigners who were extremely difficult to approach, let alone develop and recruit. In seeking to press the flesh, many officers drank too much. More important, many case officers—and Ames was one of them—chafed at the recruitment game, the desperate socializing in search of a foreigner who could be written up as a promising "developmental." Case officers grow cynical in such a world—and they've been living in one since the 1960s. Before he volunteered his services to the Soviets, Ames amused himself in Mexico City by privately critiquing the station's case officers and their numerous recruited agents, who produced very little intelligence. Contrary to the common, outsider view of him, Ames was attentive to both operational details and intelligence reports. He discovered before most of his peers did that one of the most renowned case officers working in the Latin American division was a corrupt fraud, who inflated or invented most of his agents and probably pocketed some agents' pay in diamonds. Though dismissed from the service, the case officer was never jailed. On his spacious balcony in a high-rise above Mexico City, Ames often passed evenings with friends wryly belittling the DO's contributions to America's defense.

NOT A SINGLE IRAN-DESK CHIEF COULD SPEAK PERSIAN. NOT A SINGLE NEAR EAST DIVISION CHIEF KNEW ARABIC, PERSIAN, OR TURKISH.

Deeply troubled and venal, Ames slipped across that space between dissent and treason, believing it was all a charade. Given his free-spending ways, the Agency should of course have found him sooner. But spotting Ames psychologically, or by questioning his peers, would have been very difficult. In the CIA family there are many dysfunctional members.

Peeling away the layers of the Agency's mystique—by learning how to read agents' files, acquiring familiarity with operational details, gaining access to "restricted-handling" cases—can take years. One thing, however, did not take me long to learn: there was a severe discrepancy between the reputations of most senior officers and their talents. Sterling exceptions aside, the average senior officer rose through the hierarchy without ever learning much about the language, culture, or politics of the countries in which he served. The good case officers in my junior-officer class hunted vainly for mentors like Richard Helms, Paul Henze, and Robert Ames—renowned case officers from the past who knew their languages and their countries well. Not a single Iran-desk chief during the eight years that I worked on Iran could speak or read Persian. Not a single Near East Division chief knew Arabic, Persian, or Turkish, and only one could get along even in French. One Near East officer, sent during the Iran-contra affair to assess and debrief Manucher Ghorbanifar, the slick and savvy Iranian middleman between the Ayatollah Khomeini's regime and the Americans and Israelis, spoke no Persian and had no background in the Middle East. He repeatedly had to ask Ghorbanifar to spell the names of well-known senior Iranian officials.

At the Agency's espionage-training school ("The Farm") at Camp Peary, near Williamsburg, Virginia, instructors regularly told trainees that cultural distinctions did not matter, that an operation was an operation regardless of the target. Whether Arab, German, Turkish, Brazilian, Persian, Russian, Pakistani, or French, targets were (as Duane Clarridge, a Europe Division and counterterrorism-center chief, baldly put it) "all the same." "An op is an op," a favorite mantra of English-only case officers, is one of the DO's most self-defeating conceits.

Of all the clandestine service's Cold War missions, no task was more mystique-building, but at the same time more illusory, than the recruiting of Soviet agents. The No. 1 operational directive of every case officer was to recruit KGB officials, Soviet military-intelligence officers, and Soviet diplomats, but this essentially amounted to little more than paper-shuffling between CIA headquarters, in Langley, Virginia, and case officers in the field. Real recruitment was more often than not a sheer fluke. According to Soviet–East Europe Division officers, the best agents Ames killed were all "walk-ins," who had volunteered their services to the United States. Handling walk-ins is no mean feat, and CIA case officers have often handled sensitive walk-ins exceptionally well. But "recruiting" walk-ins has little to do with the protracted "recruitment cycle"—the spotting, assessing, developing, and recruiting of foreigners worldwide—on which the DO has built its budget and esprit de corps.

During the Cold War, DO managers in the field wanted young case officers to telephone, out of the blue, Soviet of-

ficials with whom they had no plausible reason to be in touch. The lucky case officers who made it past the telephoning and the awkward encounters were encouraged to socialize as intensely as possible. They were to ignore the constant advice of KGB defectors who warned that if a case officer met a Soviet citizen, he should simply say hello, offer a business card with a home telephone number, and then say good-bye. If the Soviet wanted to defect or to work in place against the Communist system, he would send a message. KGB defectors argued that the active development of Soviets would only draw the attention of Soviet counterintelligence, and would amplify a Soviet embassy's or consulate's normal paranoia. Yet the CIA persisted. The DO's mystique and pride, not to mention its jobs and budget, were at stake.

Terrible DO failures occurred in the 1980s and 1990s in Latin America, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. Not just in the Soviet Union did the CIA lose numerous agents. An organization whose motto is the verse from the Gospel of John "And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" had grown sloppy, developing a lackadaisical appreciation of the distinction between fact and fiction. Some good agents, and many mediocre or worthless ones, died for their case officers' mistakes; in an environment in which poor-quality agents routinely got inflated into first-rate ones, case officers frequently put agents who really didn't know much into harm's way.

A Liars' Paradise

FROM 1947 through the early 1960s it was good to be a case officer. Almost everyone feared the Soviet Union; Communists in league with the USSR were everywhere. Except for the United States, the world was poor. More important, Washington knew very little about the postwar world for which it had reluctantly become responsible. The communications and transportation revolutions had not yet taken place. Relatively few Americans traveled abroad. Slow-moving diplomatic pouches, not arduously encrypted and decrypted cables, were the primary means of contact between Washington and the field. Diplomats and spies were often at the forefront in obtaining and analyzing information. A U.S. embassy official in Moscow could write a telegram about the Soviet soul, as Kennan did, that would actually be passed around among White House Cabinet members. What today might seem self-evident, or academic, was then exotic and classified.

The CIA sent its case officers out to gather all the information they could, and in most countries outside the Communist bloc they found the locals receptive. Enlisting the support of the Germans, the French, or the Japanese in the face of a common enemy was not Mission Impossible. An overwhelming mutual interest, not money, brought American case officers and otherwise prickly foreigners together. Many, if not most, of the Agency's finest intelligence-producing sources were unpaid. In the first two decades of the Agency's existence, when the DO evolved out of the covert-action-oriented Office of Policy Coordination and the espionage-oriented Office of Special Operations, recruiting spies was not a head-counting game. According to one old Agency hand, "We would never have tolerated . . . bragging about lining up ducks [recruitments], as if clandestine intelligence were some kind of assembly line."

The Directorate of Operations (or, as it was then euphemistically known, the

Directorate of Plans) was a clubbish group of men. Even after the huge expansion of the clandestine service, during the early 1950s (more new employees were hired then than during the Vietnam War), graduates of prestigious colleges and universities predominated. Washington's Metropolitan and Alibi Clubs perhaps had as many operational discussions within their walls as did Agency headquarters. Senior officers ranked and promoted their juniors in a highly subjective manner. This old-boy system had its problems. But racking up recruitments, good or bad, did not necessarily get an officer promoted.

In the 1950s and early 1960s the CIA's top leaders—men like Allen Dulles, Frank Wisner, Richard Bissell, Tracy Barnes, and Desmond Fitzgerald—were profoundly devoted to covert action. Covert action (orchestrating coups, anti-Communist insurgencies, academic conferences, labor unions, political parties, publishing houses, and shipping companies) required considerable manpower, and it drew the intellectual crème de la crème. It compelled a higher degree of intellectual curiosity, accomplishment, and operational savoir faire than did espionage ("espionage" referring specifically to the recruitment of foreign intelligence agents). With so many talented officers working in covert action, and with most of the foreigners involved being friendly collaborators and not "recruited" assets, the DO could scarcely base promotions on the number of recruitments a case officer made each year.

After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, covert action became politically riskier. More important, press revelations during the 1960s and 1970s about various CIA maneuvers of dubious legality and wisdom, followed by several bouts of congressional investigation, helped to sully the Agency's covert-action credentials. Though covert action continued worldwide in the 1970s, it employed less manpower. Inside the CIA working on covert action no longer had the same prestige, and was becoming a slower track for promotions.

By the time Stansfield Turner became Jimmy Carter's director of central intelligence, in 1977, the decades-old tug-of-war inside the Agency between covert action and espionage was over. Henceforth covert action would be only an avocation. Espionage was the area in which case officers could better manage their destinies.

Sometime in the late 1960s and early 1970s recruiting became the case officer's categorical imperative. The Vietnam War helped to propel the change. Before the war espionage was a cause; Vietnam turned it into a business. The CIA was in competition and collusion with the Pentagon in the acquisition and dissemination of intelligence about South Vietnam, North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. As the war intensified, CIA chiefs in Saigon demanded a minimum of 300 intelligence reports a month from their station. Local agents of highly dubious value were continually added to the roster and the payroll in order to meet this unrealistic objective.

Confronted with an expanding war, Langley significantly enlarged the case-officer corps. Now far fewer new officers came from the nation's elite schools. The growing anti-war movement on eastern college campuses deprived the Agency of the long-cherished "P" (professor) factor in its discreet, highly successful university recruiting networks. Scandals involving domestic mail interception, wiretaps, and surveillance activities by the CIA, reported by Seymour M. Hersh in *The New York Times* in 1974, finished off CIA-university relations.

The war combined and accelerated three factors highly corrosive of the clandestine service: a surplus of easily recruited "sources"; poor quality control on intelligence re-

ports; and falling admission standards for case officers. Though there were CIA operatives and analysts who realized (and steadfastly advised Washington policymakers) in the late 1960s that America's war in Vietnam was lost, Southeast Asia became, bureaucratically, a liars' paradise, where aggressive, self-promoting case officers quickly got ahead.

The Numbers Racket

As the Soviets expanded the Cold War geographically in the 1960s and 1970s, the CIA significantly increased the size and number of its stations and bases throughout Africa and Latin America. In the Third World working for the CIA was a rite of passage for many men (Third World agents were and are almost all men). For Latin Americans, Arabs, and Africans, association with the Agency could be highly respectable and reasonably well paid. The CIA was the little guy's conduit to the cabal that ruled the world. Third World targets were usually inexpensive and relatively easy for the DO to recruit and run, and their "flap" potential was far less than that of agents operating against our sensitive First World allies.

With most of the Third World seen as a legitimate Cold War arena, case officers worldwide could go after local diplomatic or military representatives. Even if the CIA was not in fact interested in recruiting a given official of a given Third World country (admittedly, a rare circumstance during the Cold War), a case officer could still chase the target and label him an "access agent," who might conceivably lead to a more promising, usually Soviet, recruit. With the entire Third World "on the screen," recruitment possibilities for the average case officer increased enormously. One of my former chiefs of station once remarked about a Soviet case, "Isn't it amusing to contemplate the hundreds—God knows—of African access agents we've recruited over the years when the Russians are among the world's worst racists?" All told, the CIA recruited thousands of people from the Third World.

The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, with its enthusiasm for "objective criteria" in "performance appraisal systems," further solidified the DO's head-counting ethic. Though the act didn't technically apply to the Agency (Langley is in theory exempt from civil-service regulations), in spirit it did. The business-school philosophy of "management by objective" officially became de rigueur throughout the DO. (The current harassment problems of the IRS probably also stem from this quantitative philosophy run amok.)

As the CIA got larger, bureaucratic standards were formalized. The power of DO promotion panels eclipsed the old patronage system. The organization needed a common criterion for "objectively" judging the case-officer corps. To a considerable extent the American ethic of judging all people equally and the American fondness for translating merit into numbers gave rise to the practice of agent head-counting on case-officer evaluations.

To most people at the time, the annual head count—how many agents have you recruited?—seemed an efficient, progressive idea. Quickly, however, a rather raw reckoning of numbers took hold. By the early 1980s Africa, Near East, and Latin America Division case officers dominated the DO because recruitments in their regions were relatively easy. By the time I entered the service, senior officers regularly counseled young Soviet and Europe Division case officers to have at least one "recruitment tour" in Africa or the Middle East early in their careers, in order to avoid being forgotten by the promotion panels. At The Farm senior Africa Division officers tried to enlist trainees by bragging that operatives in their division racked up more recruitments, and thus were promoted more quickly, than those in any other division. Not once did I meet a senior Africa Division officer who extolled the quality of the intelligence reports produced by the division's vast roster of agents.

THE CIA'S CLANDESTINE SERVICE ENCOURAGES DECENT CASE OFFICERS, GRADUALLY AND NATURALLY, TO EVOLVE INTO LIARS.

Overseas in the 1980s and 1990s my junior-officer class encountered DO managers offering $3,000 bonuses for "scalps" provided by Christmas or Easter. Bottles of champagne were awarded to case officers who generated the most intelligence reports. The winners usually scored twenty or thirty reports a month. In 1989 many of my colleagues were stunned to receive a cable from a division chief who had spent his career chasing Soviets. He recommended one "high quality" recruitment *per year* for each case officer in his division. This cable came on the heels of a worldwide headquarters cable announcing that *all* our Cuban agents had probably been double agents. The competition realized long ago how desperate America's case officers are for scalps. They have been happy to provide them.

In 1993 CIA Director James Woolsey sent a cable to all stations and bases encouraging case officers and their managers to push for quality, not quantity, in their recruitments

and intelligence production. To an extent Woolsey knew that there was a recruitment problem in the DO. That same year, however, the DO issued new performance-evaluation guidelines for young case officers, who are responsible for the vast majority of all DO recruitments, re-emphasizing the centrality of recruitments in the promotion process. Officers in the field didn't have to read between the lines: the numbers game continued. Woolsey never knew that the DO had betrayed his good intentions.

By the time I resigned, in 1993, the DO had introduced the "Asset Validation System" for assessing foreign recruits. The DO billed the AVS as a means to prevent the recruitment and running of double agents and tired Cold War leftovers. The AVS did not officially attempt to root out "cheap recruitments." However, in the early 1990s a number of scandals in which star case officers were caught fabricating agents and intelligence reports gave reform-minded case officers hope that the DO might finally rein in the promotion-by-recruitment system. We all knew that these aggressive officers had merely pushed accepted standards of exaggeration and deceit a little too far.

This hope has proved naive. Although some senior officers will now quietly admit that there has been a numbers game, they usually complain that the 1980s generation of case officers gave rise to the problem, which they and the AVS are now solving. However, the AVS—dubbed "agent scrubbing" by *The Washington Post* and often credited as a reform initiated by John Deutch (in fact William Webster began the program; Robert Gates and James Woolsey significantly expanded it)—has not really affected the recruitment game. Case officers must now write a few more cables for each recruitment—a little extra paperwork in order to gain a seal of approval. Officers can even avoid doing the paperwork altogether: in the ever-growing paper flow between headquarters and the field, AVS requirements can easily disappear for years

into a bureaucratic black hole. The recruitment of mediocre, if not entirely worthless, access agents continues.

Case officers have learned that they can recruit a worthless agent and later have the agent scrubbed without damage to their careers. Close questioning of recruitments in the DO remains uncommon. A case officer can recruit eight assets in Geneva, move on to his next tour in Paris, have all eight Geneva-based agents scrubbed, and still receive glowing evaluations from the Paris chief of station.

The AVS also does nothing to verify the value of information from the foreign agents who produce clandestine intelligence and who are the *raison d'être* of espionage. Standards for judging a source's intelligence production are so low that a case officer can easily believe, or pretend to believe, that the most routine contact is a first-rate "intel" developmental. With "forward-leaning" (that is, optimistic) cable traffic papering his way, an ambitious case officer can turn a friendly low-level telephone-company official into a sensitive penetration of a foreign nation's telecommunications industry. Once headquarters certifies a developmental's intelligence reports, the case officer knows that the developmental's recruitment will probably be approved. Clever case officers can also easily "push" the facts and opinions available in open-source news, or mirror classified State Department telegrams, to make a developmental or an agent seem like an adequate intelligence producer. Pushing the news and mirroring State have, regrettably, become second nature inside the DO, particularly among aggressive officers who know the system. And once poor intelligence becomes acceptable, the rule of the lowest common denominator takes hold, and cheap intel and agents inevitably become the standard.

The Agency knows that DO soft reporting on State Department issues often draws the ire of U.S. diplomats. Foreign Service officers who have access to clandestine-intelligence reports have long known that the CIA is poaching on their terrain. And as any Agency analyst will admit, the State Department and overseas representatives of the U.S. Treasury have generally provided the finest official commentary on politics and economics. Clandestine information from paid agents is by no means inherently superior to information from unpaid sources, as outsiders usually presume. Whether the subject is NATO expansion, democracy in Russia, Toulouse's Airbus versus Seattle's Boeing, the U.S. trade embargo against Iran, or the future course of South Africa, Kazakhstan, or Croatia, it has been diplomats and their contacts—not case officers and their agents—who have usually proved to be the U.S. government's most knowledgeable sources. But State reporting is not, like Agency reporting, appetizingly packaged in bite-size morsels. Diplomatic telegrams do not benefit from the boldly printed, highly classified code words that adorn Agency products. Bureaucratically inept, politically timid, and cash-starved, the State Department has rarely tried to take on Langley—a rich and tough bureaucratic power—for the DO's recruitment antics and shoddy reporting.

When I was in the service, I regularly encountered DO bosses who encouraged their case officers to put information gained from State cover work into CIA intelligence channels. When they couldn't duplicate State sources, case officers tried to borrow or to steal them, thereby putting U.S. diplomats in the awkward position of having to explain to their foreign counterparts why the U.S. government sometimes sends two "diplomats" asking the same questions.

Though case officers deserve most of the blame for debasing American espionage, they could not have done it alone. Analysts in the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence, who are the primary consumers and judges of foreign-intelligence reporting, share the responsibility. Like case officers, the analysts generally don't have the necessary languages, academic preparation, or in-country experience in their areas of supposed expertise. Ever since Robert Gates, as deputy director of intelligence, reorganized the Directorate of Intelligence in the early 1980s, it has been rare for an analyst to spend more than a few years working on one country. Promotions, especially promotions to managerial grades, come more quickly to generalists who have covered several areas. Sitting in six-by-six, usually windowless, cubicles, and confronted daily with demands for short-order "finished" intelligence, analysts rarely have the desire to sacrifice their careers by slowly building the skills that give uncommon insight into foreign countries.

Too Many Spooks—Too Few Spies

AGENT scrubbing has not yet advanced an answer to the question that has bedeviled the Directorate of Operations: How do you rank and promote the entire cadre of DO case officers when valuable recruitments are so few in number and so difficult to obtain? The exact number of case officers is classified, but U.S. press reports of approximately 2,000 are not far off the mark. In some U.S. embassies and consulates CIA case officers outnumber diplomats who report on political and economic affairs. The number of developmentals and agents necessary to keep junior and mid-level case officers busy is large: demand creates supply.

An honest discussion of recruitments, intelligence production, and promotions would cast doubt on Agency operations and careers since at least the 1970s. The DO's future, or at least its staffing levels and current management, would also be called into question. And case officers would have to confess to themselves and to Congress that the chances of success in agent recruitment today are even worse than they were in the past.

The much trumpeted challenges of the twenty-first century, unlike those of the Cold War era, are not worldwide struggles that define, galvanize, and divide nations. The Chinese may well become a serious menace, but they are not inspiring or funding radical anti-Western guerrilla movements and political parties in the Third World. China and the rogue states—Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, North Korea—have embassies and consulates worldwide, offering the DO, in theory, numerous targets, but the CIA has had little success in recruiting these countries' diplomats and intelligence officers. With rare exceptions, intelligence coups against rogue states, terrorists, and the Chinese come from volunteers.

Only a handful of people in Paris, Bonn, or New Delhi have, for example, exploitable access to resident Iranian officials and scientists; the odds that a case officer could locate, let alone recruit, an Iranian source are poor. Just meeting an interesting Iranian without the host country's assistance or knowledge is extremely difficult. If the French, the Germans, or the Indians were to become hostile to U.S. espionage operations, CIA case officers would have only a remote chance of doing anything worthwhile. And with the Soviet threat gone, Europeans have become noticeably more hostile to CIA officers operating on European soil. The Western Europeans now regularly exchange information among themselves about the CIA. The French, the Germans, and the Austrians recently fired warning shots by seeking the removal of case officers who failed to understand the new post–Cold War ground rules. National pride and differing national interests (the European Union, for instance, has consistently downplayed Iran's nefarious behavior in order to maintain commercial ties with Iran) have severely restricted Agency operations in Europe and elsewhere.

Current DO operations against America's toughest Middle Eastern foes—Iran and Iraq—have essentially devolved into "cold pitches," in which case officers with little biographical or psychological information on their targets, whom in many cases they have never even met before, "pitch" a clandestine relationship with the CIA in exchange for money. This approach can occasionally work, but it is neither a particularly clever nor a thoughtful way to get foreigners to risk their lives for the United States. When the approach does work, however, such quick hits read well on case-officer performance evaluations.

Glasnost?

SPYING is the second-oldest profession. Irrespective of Langley's incompetence, or American doubts about covert action, spying in some form will continue. The intelligence debate is not about whether we should spy but about how we can spy well. If Washington could find reliable sources of information on Iran's Ministry of Intelligence, local Shi'ite opposition in the oil-rich regions of Saudi Arabia, or Communist China's military general staff, America would be safer for the effort. All these "human intelligence" targets are extraordinarily difficult to reach, but if the DO were an organization with long-range plans and talented personnel, it might have a chance.

The window of opportunity for reform that was inadvertently opened by the Ames case is now closing. In Washington, where elected and appointed officials remonstrate with the CIA's functionaries but rarely fire them, the DO's senior officers suspect that if they take a few blows, make a few cosmetic reforms, and hang tight, they will outlast their critics. Not a single senior officer was fired for the Ames debacle. No one was fired for any of the strictly operational flaps and fiascoes of the past ten years (case officers dismissed because of the highly politicized Iran-contra and Guatemalan human-rights affairs don't count). Some of the perpetrators have ended up with senior-service promotions and distinguished-intelligence medals.

Reforming the CIA is a herculean task. The unforgiving law of bureaucratic rot—first-rate people usually associate with and advance other first-rate people, but second choose third, and third choose fourth—has come brutally into play in the CIA's closed society. First-rate people are now few and far between. How does one reform an institution in which the guiding 10 percent are arguably the institution's most disingenuous, least qualified officials? How does a director of central intelligence who comes from outside the CIA look down from his seventh-floor perch and separate capable people from the incompetent? No outsider, no matter how savvy, can navigate successfully inside the DO without case officers to guide him.

Closed societies are by definition impervious to most forms of outside discipline and oversight, and an espionage service must to a large and unhealthy extent be a closed society. First-rate or third, case officers and agents must be camouflaged and protected.

Outsiders cannot save the Directorate of Operations from itself unless they hold it accountable for all its failures and deficiencies. The junior and mid-level case officers who are considering leaving the organization need to see some sign that outsiders will no longer tolerate sham or bungled operations. At a minimum, the President, the CIA director, and Congress's intelligence-oversight committees must ensure that the Agency's inspector general and counterintelligence investigations are accurate and fair. The inspector general's office has often oscillated between blatant collusion with the DO and anti-DO grandstanding before Congress. And counterintelligence reports by the DO's various staffs and divisions usually fall victim to back-room machinations that keep even useless senior officers relatively unblemished and consistently unpunished.

Though inspector general and counterintelligence reports have rarely been tough on the DO, they have almost always been too tough for senior case officers to swallow. When surprisingly scathing inspector general or counterintelligence investigations do not lead to the dismissal of senior officers guilty of gross incompetence, good officers resign or fall silent.

Firing the old guard will not by itself change the culture of the clandestine service. As in any bureaucracy, senior functionaries have progeny. Even good case officers inevitably make debilitating compromises if they are working in a bad system. First-rate operatives who know they've collected little truly meaningful intelligence over the years can nevertheless idealize the Directorate of Operations, the myth and methods of clandestine intelligence becoming inseparable from their identities, honor, and family life. Only a complete overhaul of the service that would drastically reduce the number of veteran case officers has a chance of saving the clandestine service. In order to reform U.S. espionage, outsiders must use the only sure leverage they have for safely prying open the clandestine service: DO intelligence reports. The director and the intelligence-oversight committees, or the outside experts they appoint, can review the intelligence production of selected officers, operational desks, staffs, centers, and divisions. Though a case officer may recruit a highly valuable agent who produces no intelligence reporting (for example, a code clerk at a foreign embassy), all non-covert-action recruitments are meant to lead, eventually, to intelligence production. If outside experts compare open-source, classified non-Agency, and DO information on a subject, they can find out whether the DO is lying to itself and others. This will take time and energy, of course.

NO SENIOR OFFICER WAS FIRED FOR THE AMES DEBACLE. NO ONE WAS FIRED FOR ANY OF THE FLAPS AND FIASCOS OF THE PAST TEN YEARS.

With a cadre of good case officers as his eyes, ears, and hands, the CIA director might have a chance to overcome the DO's problems. He may discover, however, that the bureaucracy has irretrievably broken down. In that case he, or Congress, should consider what only a few years ago would have been unthinkable: rebuilding the clandestine service from scratch. America's national security would not be compromised by temporarily shutting down the DO. A Directorate of Operations that produces mostly mediocre intelligence and egregiously stupid coup d'état schemes against, for example, Saddam Hussein harms the United States abroad.

If the Agency were truly intent on reform, the Directorate of Operations would abolish most of its diplomat-spy positions and replace them with "non-official cover" officers, who operate outside an embassy or consulate, usually as businessmen or consultants. NOCs are far from the elite of the clandestine service, and typical non-official covers are usually weak and small-scale, given the growing and understandable reluctance of U.S. businesses to provide Langley with any help in this regard. Nonetheless, only NOCs and NOC-directed agent networks can plausibly penetrate terrorist groups, arms-merchants' networks, and scientific associations, institutes, and corporations potentially involved in nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons production. Unlike inside case officers, with their flimsy diplomatic covers, NOCs can quietly enter and exit countries, meet foreigners, and pass through foreign internal-security checks without setting off alarms. Deploying mostly NOCs overseas would also subvert the numbers game. NOCs work without diplomatic immunity: contemplating jail or worse, they would more scrupulously evaluate the intelligence benefits of a prospective espionage operation.

Senior inside officers, who have no intention of superannuating themselves and their protégés, will disparage the value of non-official cover in the DO's future, keeping NOCs an obedient sideshow. NOCs, who are locked into the closed

world of the clandestine service more tightly than inside officers are, won't complain. The better NOCs, of course, have already done what most of their better diplomat-spy colleagues have done: they've resigned or retired.

If there were no entrenched bureaucracy tirelessly challenging reform, rebuilding the clandestine service would be much easier. Bringing in graduates of America's leading colleges and universities and multilingual Americans who have lived abroad—our finest pool of intelligence talent—is not an impossible task. More than any other country, the United States can draw on a multi-ethnic, polyglot society for its intelligence service. Congress in particular bears special responsibility for guaranteeing the reform of the clandestine service. It alone has the financial authority to force changes inside the DO. After the scandals of the 1970s Congress wisely chose to exercise its right under the 1947 National Security Act to oversee the CIA more closely. Unfortunately, the oversight committees have become more often Langley's sympathetic partners than its demanding judges. Trafficking in executive-branch "secrets" is habit-forming, and congressmen and their staffers aren't immune to the allure and patriotism of being players in America's covert efforts. Especially Republicans, who generally admire the Directorate of Operations for its stealthy, anti-Communist, realpolitik image, should be more parsimonious with their favor. Congress's recent decision to drop the "whistle blower" provision from the 1998 intelligence authorization bill, which would have protected Agency employees who notify Congress of CIA wrongdoing, was a serious mistake. Capitol Hill needs more and sharper eyes inside the DO, not fewer.

Last July, George Tenet, the newly confirmed CIA director, appointed Jack Downing to be the new head of the clandestine service. A good linguist, an ex-Marine, and a member of the DO's old guard, Downing is described by a case officer who worked with him as "a consensus candidate, entirely acceptable to the DO dons" who run the DO in coordination with the deputy director of operations. In his worldwide "hello" cable to the troops, Downing wrote that the DO was still suffering from serious problems and required continuing reform. His Marine Corps candor is certainly a step in the right direction, but as every case officer who has developed a foreigner knows, words are cheap—particularly when coming from senior DO officers. But Downing deserves the benefit of the doubt. Tenet and Congress's intelligence-oversight committees should ensure, however, that the doubt is reasonable and fleeting.

It would be a shameful irony if America allowed the clandestine service, which once tried so enthusiastically to fight the Cold War, to fall victim to a closed society of its own making. Good case officers, who really have been on the front lines of America's defense, deserve better: the right to be proud, once again, of their dark profession.

Special Intelligence

by ROBERT D. KAPLAN

The roles of the CIA and the military may merge, in the form of "Special Forces," made up of data-analyzing urban commandos

THE United States military, for all its sex scandals, has an easy time with the media in comparison with the Central Intelligence Agency. Media criticism of the military is periodically mixed with awe, as when journalists reported the successes of the Gulf War, made heroes out of Generals Colin Powell and Norman Schwarzkopf, and lionized bridge-construction units in Bosnia. But media criticism of the CIA is so constant and blistering that it suggests a hatred of the intelligence profession itself—or at least a feeling that spy agencies are obsolete in a post–Cold War information age. That is ironic, because the intelligence industry is sure to become even more necessary for our well-being, and therefore more powerful within government.

That was one conclusion I reached after serving briefly as a consultant to the Army's Special Forces Regiment at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Special Forces are a military growth industry. The new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Henry H. Shelton, comes from the Special Operations Forces. In 1996 U.S. Special Forces were responsible for 2,325 missions in 167 countries involving 20,642 people—only nine per operation, on average. Words like "low-key" and "discreet" are frequently used by Special Forces members to describe what they do. Considering that the threat posed by Russian mafias and Russian nuclear terrorists is now greater than that posed by Russian tanks and infantry, the military usefulness of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization will depend more on the integration of Special Forces within NATO's largely conventional command than on the integration of the Czech Republic and other former Eastern-bloc states. Then there are the gas and oil pipelines soon to be built through unstable tribal lands around the Caspian Sea, which will need protection; mounting problems with drug cartels; a predicted upsurge in the kidnapping of rich and politically prominent people and their children; the increase in climatic catastrophe, now that human beings are