

Mission Impossible?

CIA, From CI

craft, professionalism and adherence to American values," one top agency official said. "Good luck, Tony."

The agency has lost not only some of its respect and self-confidence, but also the Soviet threat that nurtured its esprit de corps and its budgets for the 50 years of its existence. Yet spying is as important as it ever was. The threat of a global nuclear holocaust has abated, but more diverse threats abound. What are the intentions of North Korea's leaders? What are the contents of a Kazakh nuclear physicist's briefcase? Who's on the guest list at a terrorist training camp in Yemen? America's electronic intelligence network remains the envy of the world, but satellites, cameras and microphones are not as good at ferreting out that kind of information. Besides, even Third World countries are becoming more adept at protecting their secrets, using fiber optics, commercial encryption programs, digital switching and, in the cases of Iran, Iraq, Libya and North Korea, underground bunkers. The CIA's ability to buy and steal "human intelligence"—the kind collected by spies instead of satellites—is inadequate and getting worse.

Reforming and rebuilding America's clandestine service will require Lake—who must first pass muster in Senate confirmation hearings—to be both a lion and a fox. The CIA has a long tradition of scorning outsiders. Senior CIA officials say Lake will have at best a month to win the respect of the agency's top managers. He must be tough enough to take on the entrenched mandarins of the CIA's Directorate of Operations, the spy service, which chewed up both the current CIA director, John Deutch, and Deutch's predecessor in the Clinton administration, R. James Woolsey.

Lake cannot afford to repeat the mistakes his predecessors made. Both Woolsey and Deutch surrounded themselves with a handful of loyal aides and insulated themselves from the rank-and-file at the CIA. "Woolsey never got a feel for the place," says a senior CIA official. "Deutch delegated all his day-to-day authority

to his executive secretary [Nora Slatkin], while he reveled in being a Cabinet member."

At the same time, Lake also must be clever enough to muster enough political support from the White House, the Congress and the press to see him through any new scandals that come his way. Woolsey lost the confidence of the White House and eventually stopped going to meetings there. Lake has a solid relationship with the new national security adviser, Samuel R. Berger, his former deputy, which should help ensure that doesn't happen again.

The challenge for Lake will be to both embrace and discipline his battered agency, to restore its pride while stressing the important of obedience to the law and respect for human rights. CIA officials and administration policymakers say Deutch did little to improve the agency's bread-and-butter work of collecting human intelligence, the task that most distinguishes the CIA from other intelligence agencies and one that is likely to grow even most important during the next four years.

To accomplish this, Lake will have to attack three major problems in the clandestine service.

The first is the CIA operations directorate's long-standing policy of promoting case officers—spies who recruit and run foreign agents—based on how many agents they recruit, not according to the quality of their agents or the value of the intelligence they produce. Although the CIA's Directorate of Operations now has an "asset validation" system, some clandestine service officers estimate that "cheap recruitments" (a few of them downright fraudulent) still account for at least 75 percent of the CIA's assets. Even worse is the CIA's habit of recruiting large numbers of spies—in Cuba and East Germany, for example—who really work for the other side.

The second problem is the quality of America's own spies, exemplified by Deutch's claim that suspected Russian mole Harold Nicholson was a standout officer. The CIA is having difficulty meeting its recruiting targets, despite lowering some of its standards, among other



things accepting and promoting some spies who cannot even speak a foreign language. Drug tests and polygraph exams are partly responsible, but the larger problem is the fact that few top college graduates these days prefer the CIA to investment banking, the State Department or even journalism.

When the CIA was handed the job of carrying out reconnaissance missions for the U.S. military in Bosnia (a task the Pentagon didn't want for fear of casualties, and one that has resulted in the accidental death of one female CIA officer), the clandestine service found it had fewer than four officers who could speak even passable Serbo-Croatian. In Iraq, the CIA routinely deployed officers unschooled in that region's languages, cultures and history to run and debrief its Iraqi and Kurdish agents, with predictable results. There has been a parade of other botched CIA operations in recent years in Paris, Rome, Athens, Istanbul and Helsinki, among other places.

Not all the clandestine service's "flaps," as they are called, are tragedies. Some are farces. In 1997, a group of case officers wearing disguises were conducting a counter-terrorist operation when they accidentally locked themselves out of the van carrying their high-tech surveillance gear. Greek police caught the CIA's finest trying to break into their own vehicle.

At the same time the CIA is having trouble

finding even a few good men and women, it is asking its clandestine service officers to go after harder targets. Gone are the days when a case officer could get ahead by recruiting a Soviet diplomat at a cocktail party in Ouagadougou. Terrorist groups, drug cartels and nuclear weapons labs are tougher to penetrate than foreign embassies. In addition, the CIA is once again trying to expand its Non-Official Cover (NOC) program, moving spies out of U.S. embassies and hiding them behind fake companies and other facades. Without official cover as diplomats, however, case officers can be imprisoned or even executed if they are caught, instead of simply being declared persona non grata and sent home.

The CIA also has tried to improve the quality of the training it provides to case officers, especially at its basic training facility at Camp Peary, near Williamsburg, long a drying-out stop for officers with drinking problems. But the fact that Nicholson was assigned there as an instructor suggests that Lake may want to take a hard look at how good agency training really is, both for new officers and for mid-career spies.

The third problem Lake must confront is the spy service's lack of accountability. Despite their shared reputations for exceptional self-assurance, both Woolsey and Deutch treated the clandestine service with kid gloves. Given carte blanche by the House and Senate intelligence committees to clean house after the Aldrich Ames spying scandal, Woolsey ignored the CIA inspector general's recommendations and declined to fire even one of the officers damned by the agency's Ames investigation. Deutch was nearly as gentle. Senior DO officers were both amazed and relieved when he allowed the highest-ranking officer implicated in the scandal, clandestine service chief Hugh (Ted) Price, at best a minor sinner in the Ames affair, to retire early. (Price's forced retirement at least was an exception to the CIA's usual policy of disciplining only low- and mid-level officers and promoting their superiors.)

After French counterintelligence officials exposed a bungled CIA operation in Paris, Inspector General Fred Hitz concluded that CIA incompetence, not French prowess, was to blame. Again, Deutch ignored Hitz's recommendations. The outcome: The CIA officer re-

sponsible for managing day-to-day operations in France was ordered to prepare a short paper on proper tradecraft techniques. (Write on the blackboard 100 times: "I will not recruit double agents.") The Paris chief of station was given the Distinguished Intelligence Medal. The operations directorate's European division chief, who had approved the ill-starred French operation, got a plum chief-of-station assignment.

The senior officer who presided over the CIA's blown operation in Iraq, in which Saddam Hussein executed hundreds and probably thousands of Kurds, earlier helped run a similarly bungled operation in Iran that cost at least 20 Iranian CIA assets their lives. Although the officer was dressed down in at least one meeting, CIA officials say Deutch has not officially reprimanded, let alone disciplined or fired, anyone in the DO's Near East Division for botching the Iraq operation.

Deutch's stiffest punishments were reserved for mid-level officers in Guatemala who failed to report that at least one of their assets in the Guatemalan military was implicated in the murder of an American citizen and that numerous others were probably guilty of human rights abuses. But Deutch ignored the sloppy, inadequate reporting from the CIA station in Guatemala and focused exclusively on the charges that had raised hackles on Capitol Hill and in the press. The message, many clandestine service officers concluded: Deutch was more interested in political and public relations problems than the underlying rot in the operations directorate. How will Lake handle similar situations? Will he seek to impose tougher punishments?

Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that young case officers are leaving the CIA. An inspector general's investigation into the causes of the disaffection, first reported by *The Washington Post*, has found that the top half of about 30 complaints cited by departing employees are about bad management. Unless Lake is serious about admitting the agency's failures, reforming its culture and attacking its weaknesses, the downward spiral will continue. And as has happened in the past, the nation may not discover how inadequate its intelligence agencies have become until it really needs them.