

CIA Faces an Ax, but How Sharp?

By Thomas Powers

THE HOUR OF TRUTH has arrived for the Central Intelligence Agency. Three years after the Soviet Union dissolved while the stunned CIA was in mid-sentence, Congress is preparing for a long second look at the intelligence charter it approved in a climate of crisis in 1947. The first step is establishment of a 17-member commission, already approved by the Senate and pending in the House, to study U.S. intelligence needs and how they ought to be met.

No one at the CIA has any doubt about what this means: The agency in its current form is no longer sacred. What it will look like at the end of the commission's reassessment, the size of its budget, even the name over the door — all are in question. Intelligence professionals fear the worst. There is an appetite for blood-letting in Washington, fueled by the embarrassment of the Ames Soviet "mole" case; a sex-bias suit by female employees; a string of bad intelligence estimates; the agency's die-hard resistance to cutting its \$3-billion budget; plain dislike of the director, R. James Woolsey, by legislators, and a growing belief that without the Soviet Union to worry about, the CIA has nothing to do.

Nor is there any lack of ideas circulating in Washington for a new and improved intelligence service, and perhaps two. Critics for years have proposed breaking the CIA in half. Some favor one organization to engage in secret intelligence activities while a second writes up intelligence estimates using information from all sources. Other tinkers would

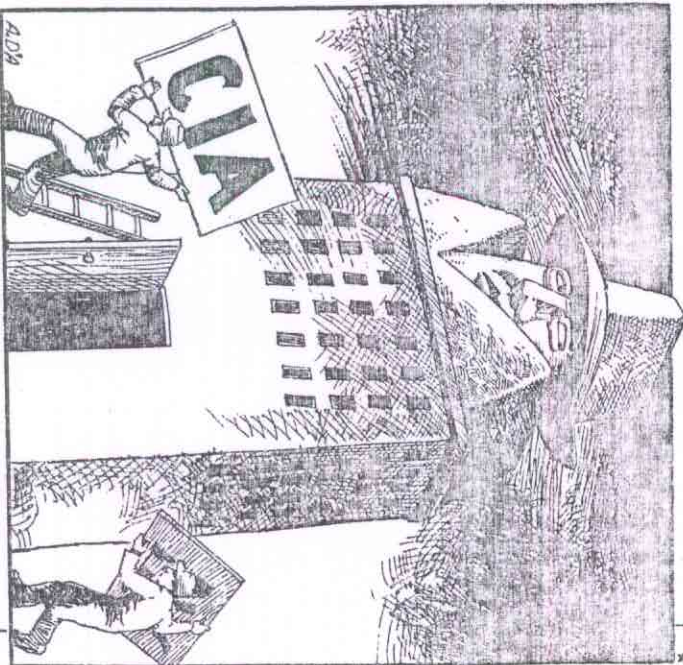
divide the existing agency differently — between a secret collecting and analyzing arm, and a separate body to conduct covert operations.

No consensus for reform yet exists, but discontent is high with Woolsey's pugnacious defense of the CIA. A widespread sense that something is badly wrong centers on the agency's numerous failures in handling the case of Al-drich H. Ames, who has admitted spying for Moscow between 1986 and his arrest earlier this year. The Soviets penetrated every other major Western intelligence service during the Cold War, but it is doubtful that any other Soviet spy did as much damage, over so long a period, with the arguable exception of Kim Philby, the Soviet mole inside British intelligence.

After the CIA's inspector general completed a 400-page report on the case, which criticized sharply a dozen agency officials, Woolsey issued official reprimands criticizing their performance. Last week, he demoted two top officers.

The Ames case is one of those highly visible gaffes no official agency could survive unscathed — but even without it the CIA would have been facing hard times. Despite huge growth during the Reagan years, to a peak of more than 20,000 employees, the CIA failed to grasp what was happening to the Soviet Union under Mikhail S. Gorbachev.

By the time the Soviet Union broke up, it was apparent that the CIA had for years been overestimating the size of its economy and underestimat-



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ing the crushing burden of military spending, and that the agency did not know what to do with the thousands of analysts and covert operators focused on Moscow once the Soviet threat had disappeared. When Woolsey took over in 1993, he inherited an

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old agency, huge and set in its ways, with which to monitor a new world. He argued that the United States confronted new dangers — each far less threatening than the old Soviet Union, perhaps, but harder to watch in the aggregate. The implication was that the CIA couldn't function with less money and, in fact, needed more.

The lawmakers were put out. They had been cutting Pentagon dollars — spent in their home districts — and they were impatient with Woolsey's claim that the CIA alone should prosper in the post-Cold War world. It is probably the CIA's resistance to change that is most directly responsible for the plan to rethink U.S. intelligence with the help of a commission armed with a broad congressional mandate to put everything on the table.

The real source of the animosity toward the CIA is not bad public relations, intelligence estimates that miss the point or the failure to catch Ames in a timely manner. It is the Cold War itself — the accumulated resentments of a long, expensive, frightening and sometimes ugly struggle.

Is it really possible that the new commission on U.S. intelligence will dismember or abolish the CIA? This has routinely been the fate of intelligence organizations in the past. The CIA's World War II predecessor, the Office of Strategic Services, was shut down and its functions scattered by President Harry Truman only two months after the surrender of Japan. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, its intelligence service was reorganized and renamed nine times before it resurfaced in its current form, as the Russian Intelligence Service.

Many Soviet intelligence chiefs were not only removed from office, but shot. Woolsey need not fear a firing squad, but his job is in jeopardy; and it is hard to imagine how Les Aspin, the former secretary of defense who is expected to head the commission, would be content to spend 18 months simply redrawing the arrows on organizational charts. It is probably safe to predict that from Aspin's efforts there will emerge something different, something smaller and something with a new name.

But it remains to be seen whether these changes will be cosmetic or real. U.S. presidents have grown accustomed to instant information, not just satellite photos but the most intimate communications of foreign leaders. In crises, they want someone on the ground, as in Haiti. When a new face emerges in an important foreign government they want some background history, and they want it yesterday. When they want to send a genuinely secret message, they want somebody at hand who knows where the back doors are. Presidents will not want to surrender any of these capabilities, and congressional leaders will not force them to do it. What Congress wants is to pay less for them.

The best way to predict what the intelligence commission is likely to do in the end is to consider who will be the tenant of the CIA's huge headquarters in Langley, Va. The CIA's campus is not going to be returned to woodland, the building is not going to have a second life as a GSA furniture warehouse and the desks are not going to be empty. Sitting at every one of them, in fact, and answering every phone, will be someone in the intelligence business, whatever the name on the door.