Our Stupid but Permanent CIA

What Are We Going to Do About Reforming the Agency? Nothing

By Daniel Patrick Moynihan

ANYONE WHO has ever worked with the CIA will find it painful, even hateful, to say a word against it. Or rather, to say a word against the people who work there. I worked with them in the mid-1970s at the United Nations when the then-Soviet undersecretary general defected. It was the highest ranking defection of the Cold War—the man was on most anyone's short list to succeed Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko—and it was handled with deftness and discretion. I served for eight years on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and was afterward awarded the Agency Seal Medallion: "Serving with full knowledge that his achievements would never receive public recognition . . . " Which of course describes the agency. And so there is little pleasure in addressing the CIA's current trials.

In the press coverage of Director R. James Woolsey's recent address on "The Future Direction of Intelligence" much attention was paid to his description of the accused spy Aldrich Ames as "this warped, murdering traitor" who sent Soviet agents-in-place to their deaths, persons who had "risked their lives" to help keep "us free." Few would object to this description. I think I know who one of them was. But I don't need to know; goodbye to all that. Woolsey went on to discuss the organizational changes underway to ensure that this betrayal does not happen again.

He focused his remarks on the directorate of operations and especially counterintelligence. This is where the spying gets done and all the adventure is supposed to be. It often is—sometimes with useful results, sometimes with spotty results of the kind novelist John Le Carre depicts so well. "Humint," meaning human intelligence, information gathered by spies, never was especially productive. In the early days of the Cold War we kept sending agents through the Iron Curtain. The Soviets kept picking them up and shooting them. Finally we turned to machines, ultimately satellites, with far better results.

On the one hand, Gen. William E. Odom, the former head of the National Security Agency, is surely correct in saying that our intelligence professionals "gave the United States a remarkable intelligence edge throughout the Cold War . . . . The Soviet General Staff knew that its operations were transparent to U.S. intelligence. Soviet military readiness, capabilities and resource expenditures were often more accurately known to U.S. leaders than to the Politburo."

On the other hand, the directorate of operations had a fatal attraction for persons who liked such work much too much, thinking not least that they were licensed to kill, a power denied most civil servants. In 1984, they mined harbors in Nicaragua, in gross violation of international law. Congress cut off aid to the contras. They then turned elsewhere and pretty soon we had the Iran-Contra affair of which historian Theodore Draper has written, "If ever the constitutional democracy of the United States is overthrown, we now have a better idea of how this is likely to be done."

We were mining harbors in Nicaragua because we thought the Soviet Union was establishing a base of operations in Central America as a continuation of a generic expansionism which had already, for example, secured Cuba. In the end, as President Reagan allowed, we might have to stand them off at Harlingen, Tex.

Now this reflected the all-important, defining failure of the CIA, the failure to anticipate the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. This was the task of the directorate of intelligence. Woolsey, a good public servant with a bad case, did not dwell on this lapse. He announced, "I've ordered a fundamental assessment of the entire structure and operation of the directorate of operations."

But that is not where the problem is. The problem is in the directorate of intelligence, where the thinking is supposed to be done.

Here is a sample of such thinking from 1986, as related by former secretary of state George P. Shultz in his memoir "Turmoil and Triumph." Shultz was intrigued with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, thought we might be able to do business with him.

Just what they would want you to think, explained intelligence directorate. As Shultz recalled, "Back in Washington, and especially from the CIA and its lead Soviet expert, Bob Gates, I heard that the Soviets wouldn't change and couldn't change, that Gorbachev was simply putting a new face on the same old Soviet approach to the world and to their own people. 'The Soviet Union is a despotism that works,' said Gates."

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Another former director of central intelligence, Stansfield Turner, asked the right question in 1991: "Why were so many of us so insensitive to the inevitable?"

I have a theory for which I am indebted to philosopher Thomas S. Kuhn. In his book "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions," Kuhn uses the term "paradigm" to describe the model of the way the world works that makes sense to people at the time—and that causes a good deal of trouble when a competing view comes along. Kuhn's argument is that theories give meaning to facts rather than, in any simple sense, arising out of them.

The essential point is that for people wedded to a particular paradigm, everything inside that paradigm makes sense. Everything outside sounds, well, crazy. For example, in 1992, I was talking with a former senior intelligence officer of the highest rank who had retired in 1987. He recalled Soviet defectors who "would tell us in anguished terms that the system was collapsing." What "we were doing was counting missiles," he recalled. Technique had triumphed over politics.

He concluded, wistfully, "When I retired there was not a single person in Washington who would have believed that the [Berlin] Wall would come down in 1989. If I had suggested it might, they would have packed me off to St. Elizabeths." In point of fact, in 1987 the CIA formally estimated that the per capita GDP in East Germany was higher than in West Germany. Any taxi driver in Berlin could have told them otherwise. But inside the paradigm it all made sense.

It had made sense to me until the mid-1970s. Then I began to have doubts. The demographic work of Murray Feshbach and Nick Eberstadt gave me pause. Life expectancy in the Soviet Union was declining. Why was that? Then I started noticing the lingering death of the French Communist Party, first daughter of the Marxist church. Was the belief dying?

I had an advantage here. I am sufficiently old, and from New York, I have known communism as a fighting creed. I have known labor leaders the likes of George Meany, for whom it had been a daily battle. Good God, I even knew Alexander Kerensky, who on occasion would come and lecture at Benjamin Franklin High School. I learned from him that there had been two revolutions in St. Petersburg in 1917, not one as Eisenstein portrayed it in his films. If two, why not three?

In 1979, Newsweek devoted an issue to "The Eighties." Predictions of what would happen. I submitted a short comment: In the 1980s, it was likely that the Soviet Union would break up. (The editors gave it the title "Will Russia Blow Up?").

From a hunch, this became something of a conviction. In the early 1980s I was appointed an observer to the Strategic Arms Reductions Talks (START). We would go over to Geneva from time to time. I would ask our negotiators, when they had finished with the mind-numbing details of these arms control treaties, what makes you think that there will be a Soviet Union? No reply.

In the summer of 1992, I received a note from Max M. Kampelman who became the head of the U.S. Delegation to Negotiations on Nuclear and Space Arms in 1985. Rare among American public men, he is personally familiar with the historic struggle with Marxist trade unionists more or less openly allied with the American Communist Party. He is a man who knows that ideas matter in public life. When they die, this has consequences. He wrote, "Whenever I am asked whether I had predicted the breakup of the Soviet Union or knew anybody who did, I have uniformly stated that the one person who had fully understood and made the correct analysis was you. Let that stand for the record."

There is the record. And what are we going to do about it? Nothing. No president is going to get rid of the CIA. The system makes a president feel omniscient. A daily diet of SECRETS that no one knows but him and his closest associates. That the secrets so frequently turn out to be wrong, even disastrously misleading, is something for the next fellow to worry about.

A half century ago, in 1947, Dean Acheson warned President Truman that he had the "gravest forebodings" about the CIA and that in time neither the president, "the National Security Council, nor anyone else would be in a position to know what it was doing or to control it."

He was right, but by 1948 it was already too late. The CIA will be with us half a century from now.