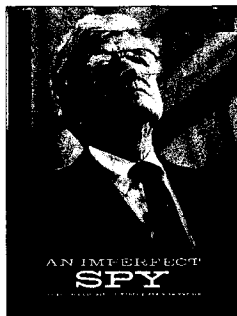


MAY 17, 1992

AN IMPERFECT SPY

CLAIR GEORGE'S SECRET LIFE IN THE CIA BY BENJAMIN WEISER

2001



THE TRIALS OF A COMPANY MAN

BENJAMIN WEISER'S PROFILE OF Clair George ["An Imperfect Spy," May 17] was comprehensive and well researched. The efforts of the independent counsel to strike a bargain by compelling George to incriminate a superior are vividly described. But a main weapon employed by the independent counsel, that of financial intimidation, is not perhaps fully explained. What the independent counsel did was to tell George, and others, either to confess to a minor infraction; turn in someone else and escape serious prosecution; or, alternatively, face months of litigation against the publicly financed independent counsel, requiring hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal defense fees.

That is why former colleagues have created a legal defense fund to protect those Central Intelligence Agency employees whose work may place them in the dilemma faced by George. If we expect our intelligence officers to work to protect our country abroad, we should ensure that they meet their accusers at home on fairer terms.

JAMES M. POTTS
Merrifield

IN SOME WAYS, CLAIR GEORGE AND HIS co-conspirators in the CIA are truly tragic figures who took on faith the rock-'em-sock-'em attitude of the Cold War and raised it to new decibel levels at a time when the Cold War was losing its charm. George and company had become, without knowing it, crusaders in rusty armor, buffalo hunters in the 20th century.

Is there any profit in sending Clair George to jail? Might we not be better served if the congressional debate on the proposals for intelligence community reform were taken beyond the turf battles in which it is now mired?

JOSEPH A. WILDERMUTH
Washington

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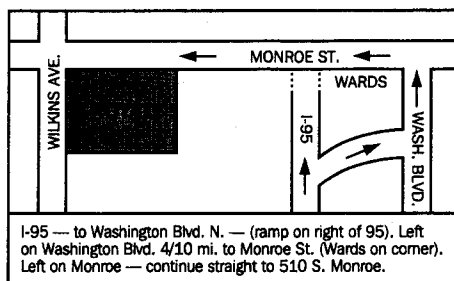
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THOSE OF US WHO WERE LUCKY enough to marry CIA men have found them dedicated, selfless, without personal ambition (try explaining to their mothers why they'll never make ambassador) and, above all, men of honor. Clair George is among the best of these.

ALICE THUERMER
Middleburg

COHEN ON THE BIG BANG

RICHARD COHEN NEATLY ESCAPED entanglement in the morass of metaphysics in his column "No Nearer, My God, to Thee" [Critic at Large, May 17]. Since Thomas Aquinas, theologians have argued that the universe had a cause, and that cause was God. We atheists say that is simply replacing one mystery with another mystery. If God does not need a cause, perhaps the universe is also one of those things that does not require a cause.

A.F. GORDON JR.
Front Royal, Va.

RICHARD COHEN'S "NO NEARER, MY GOD, to Thee" seems to lack any form of common sense. Cohen wrote about the recent scientific discoveries that seem to support the Big Bang theory. Throughout the column, he debased the findings because, as he put it, "No one so much as mentioned a further question: Never mind how the universe was created; who or what did it?" He dismissed the findings because they didn't answer his "theological" questions and because they "contradicted the traditional tenets of religion." Instead of recognizing that the findings offer further insight into a cloudy subject, Cohen whined that they did not answer the questions of the universe for him.

LIZA CORBETT
Ellicott City

RICHARD COHEN BELITTLES THE significance of the evidence supporting the Big Bang theory by comparing it to a murder investigation in which the only conclusion is "that a gun was used." In fact, the scientists did not search for motives; they identified the type of murder weapon after the body had decayed for 15 billion years.

MARTIN SCHULMAN
Columbia

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H U M P A N Y

For more than two decades, as a case officer for the CIA, Clair Elroy George persuaded people to betray their country and work for the United States government. So he must have recognized what was going on last September when he was asked to change sides himself.

George and his attorney sat across from Lawrence E. Walsh, the independent counsel investigating the Iran-contra affair, in a conference room in Walsh's downtown office. The trail had led to the CIA, and Walsh made it clear that George was about to be indicted.

But he had a final offer.

"Mr. George, we know you have information that would be beneficial to our investigation," Walsh said, according to an account George gave several friends. If George would agree, as others had, to cooperate with the prosecution and plead guilty to a lesser count, he would suffer little more than a slap on his wrist. Cooperating, it was clear, meant that George would have to finger someone higher up.

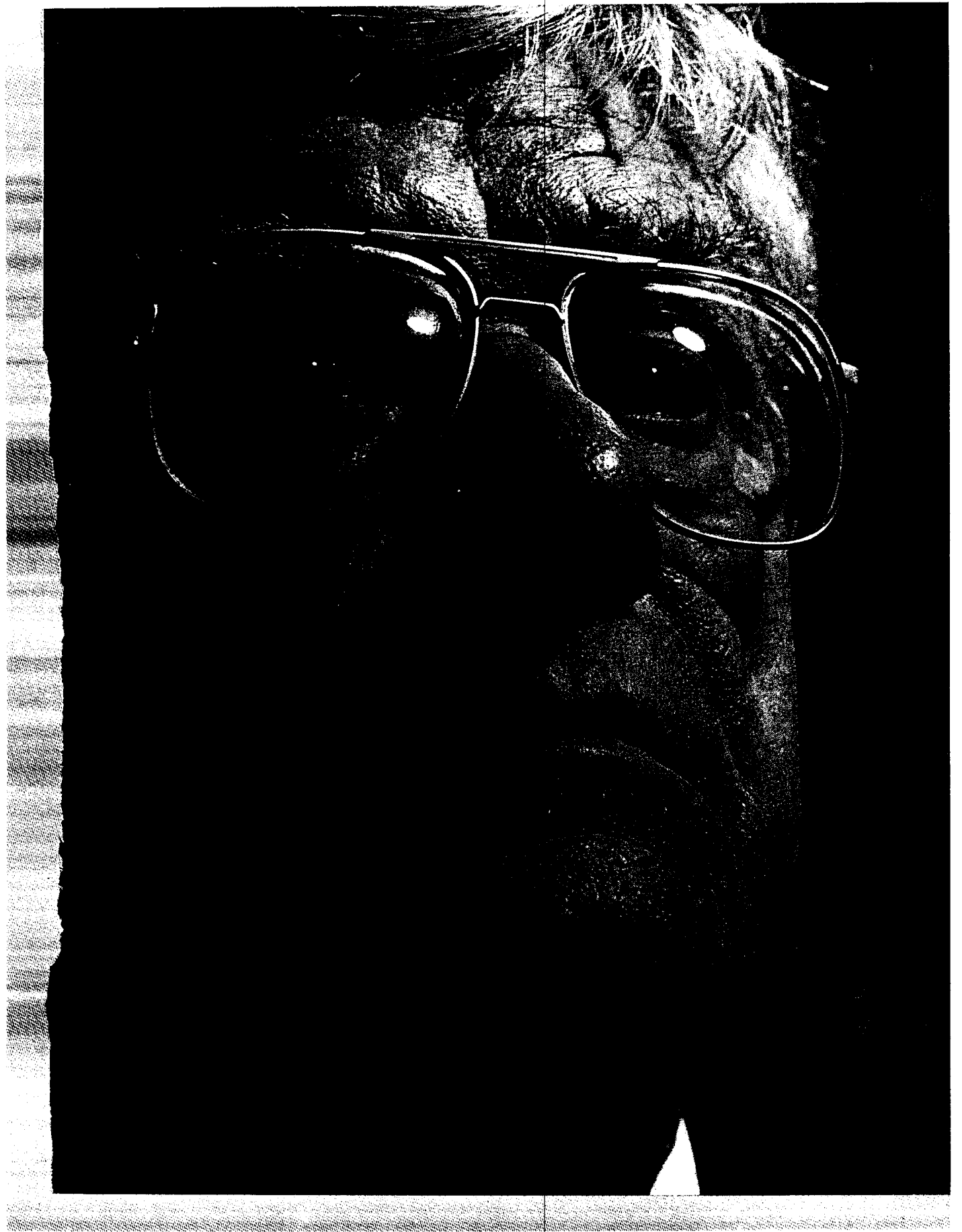
George listened impassively as Walsh made his pitch. Then, through his lawyer, he responded bluntly: He could not plead guilty because he did not feel guilty; there was nothing for him to plead guilty to. Nor did he have someone higher up to turn in.

Two days later, George was indicted on 10 counts of perjury, obstruction of justice and making false statements in connection with the Iran-contra investigations by the Congress and the Walsh grand jury. Each count carried a maximum prison term of five years and fine of \$250,000.

He gave a brief news conference outside his Bethesda

W A N

D Y B E N J A M I N W E I S E R



house. The indictment, he said, "merely makes me a pawn in a continuous drama of political exploitation. My conscience in this situation, as in my 33 years of CIA service, is clear."

Then he disappeared from public view.

Already, at the highest levels of the intelligence community, the word had gone out. After learning that George and other CIA employees would be targeted by Walsh, a group of retired senior CIA officials had set up a legal defense fund to assist them. "Don't take the fall for the President," wrote one officer in a letter accompanying a donation.

There was a stirring at lower levels as well. Mary Gormley, a 65-year-old Montgomery Hospice Society worker in Rockville, put aside her volunteering and telephoned Janet Shaw, a 70-year-old District woman who was spending her time revising a dictionary she and her husband had written. The two women called more friends who were living out quiet retirements in the Washington area. All were bound together by a secret past—as intelligence officers who had worked undercover for the CIA. Eventually 11 of them—six women and five men—agreed to sign on for yet another mission.

"Most of us have known Clair along the way," says Gormley, a 34-year-veteran who worked with George in an African CIA station. "We consider the situation so unfair that we wanted to do what we could to help."

They call themselves "the readers," and they go most days to a secure downtown facility to help George's lawyers sift through thousands of classified documents turned over by the government. They spread out at conference tables or desks or even in the hallways. Some bring box lunches. File boxes and papers are piled everywhere. George appeared overcome with gratitude when he first saw the turnout. "We have enough people here to start a station," he joked.

Energized by the chance to show their loyalty to George and the CIA, as one recently told a friend, the readers find it easy to forget one thing: "We are defending a person who is accused of crimes *against* the United States."

"I WILL FOREVER BE THE ANSWER TO two trivia questions," Clair George once joked. "The first is, 'Who was the very last person to testify before the congressional Iran-contra hearings?' The answer—Clair George. The second question is, 'Who's she?'"

Like any good intelligence officer, the bespectacled 61-year-old spy with the thick white hair and the craggy face has led an unobtrusive life in Washington: tending his garden, playing tennis at the

Chevy Chase Club, tooling around in his 1979 Chevy Malibu. But from the day he was hired in the mid-1950s, a gangly kid sent off to debrief Chinese defectors in Hong Kong, he served in increasingly risky and dangerous posts for the CIA.

A skilled recruiter and agent handler, he was what one colleague called "a top-notch street man." Said another: "He specialized in what we call the 'night soil circuit' "—the less desirable, less luxurious posts of the world. At 33, he ran his own station in Africa. At 41, he coordinated the recruitment of all Soviet agents outside the U.S.S.R. and East Bloc. At 45, he ran the Beirut station as that city turned into the most dangerous place on earth. Soon afterward, he went to Greece to replace a station chief who'd been assassinated.

In 1984, Ronald Reagan's CIA director, William Casey, placed him in charge of the Operations Directorate—making him the nation's top spymaster. For three years, he supervised all the agency's clandestine activities: the recruitment and running of agents, the penetration of foreign governments, the secret wars. A man of charm and guile and withering wit, he could explode at subordinates—some nicknamed him "PFSOB," short for purple-faced son of a bitch—and turn it off the next moment. He was the consummate insider, not the invisible man but the quasi-invisible man.

Then, as with many who rose to prominence in the Casey era, his career was derailed by the Iran-contra affair.

The nature and extent of George's role in the failed White House scheme to trade arms for hostages and divert the profits to the Nicaraguan contras—and in the contra resupply operation as a whole—are still unclear. More visible participants, such as White House aide Oliver North, behaved like ideological crusaders; George, a registered Democrat, was anything but. He is on record as opposing parts of the secret operation. He thought North was a loose cannon. He believed it was wrong to trade arms for hostages. He complained to Casey about North's use of questionable intermediaries like Richard Secord, Manucher Ghorbanifar and Albert Hakim.

Yet, when quizzed in 1986 by congressional committees about his knowledge of the operation, he shifted into a protective mode: He gave incomplete answers and, in the view of some committee members, was misleading and evasive. George subsequently apologized to Congress for his responses, some of which figure in the indictments against him.

George has pleaded not guilty to each of the counts, and his trial is currently scheduled to begin in July. Meanwhile, the case has provoked enormous debate in intelligence circles.

To some, Clair George represents the best the CIA has had to offer during the first half-century of its existence. They believe it is ironic and unfair that he is facing trial and potential incarceration.

"He was everything an intelligence officer should be, and it seems a huge cruelty that the system has used him thus," says Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the former vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, whose battles with Casey were legendary. "He deserves better."

"I think Reagan should be in the dock, not his subordinates," says John Horton, a CIA veteran who served with George in the Far East.

To others, George symbolizes everything wrong with the CIA, especially during the Casey era—the secret, illegitimate use of power; the lack of accountability; the disdain for congressional oversight and the democratic process.

George himself always believed that people had to be responsible for their acts and decisions in the CIA, says agency veteran Vincent Cannistraro, a former chief of counterterrorism operations. "If he lied," Cannistraro says, "there is a process of accountability that he needs to be held to. There aren't too many shades of gray here."

At his lawyer's instruction, George de-



A spy is born: counterclockwise from right, Clair George as a toddler; at the age of 15 in 1945; drumming up a storm in 1948.

clined several requests to be interviewed for this article, and much of his life remains shrouded in secrecy. But piecing together what can be learned about him suggests a great deal about the nature of intelligence agencies. And it helps explain the behavior of officers like George—people who spend a lifetime with the agency, and whose entire personas have been shaped by their institution.

George's career spanned nearly the whole period of the Cold War and included 32 of the first 40 years of the CIA's existence. He served 10 CIA directors and seven presidents. In the broadest sense, he *was* the CIA: Its virtues were his virtues, its flaws his flaws.

The life of a successful spy involves an "almost unspeakable paradox," says Ambassador Richard Viets, who as a Foreign Service officer served with George in India in the late 1960s and has remained his friend: "on the one hand, holding yourself to a personal code of ethics, as a representative of the institution, and on the other hand dealing in this murky world in which ethics and morality often are meaningless."

"George is a spy, and that's essentially all he is," says another admirer, who worked with him in the 1980s. "And the reason he was a good spy, and did such tremendous service to his country, is because George and the institution became one. They merged. Anything that was antithetical to the institution was antithetical to George.

"When the moment of truth came and he was confronted by a hostile congress-

sional committee and grand jury, there was no emotional conflict. The institution was embedded within his personality, and as long as he was serving this higher good, like a man who believes very deeply in his religion, he doesn't have any moral dilemma."

FROM THE BEGINNING, GEORGE WAS A natural. "He was demonstrably the best spy I ever knew," says Viets. "His hand was in one's rear pocket before the introduction was completed. He has that remarkable combination that the agency seeks—but rarely finds—of a personality which exudes trust and friendliness, but in fact is duplicitous as hell in pursuing its objectives . . .

"You are born to be a great spy as you are born to be many things in this world. And I would put Clair George in the category of great spies."

Still, those who knew him growing up in western Pennsylvania didn't guess that undercover work was in his genes.

He was born August 3, 1930, in Pittsburgh. His family moved several times, ending up, when George was 9, in Beaver Falls, an old steel town 30 miles northwest of Pittsburgh. He and his younger sister enjoyed a solid home life in a middle-income section called College Hill; the family's wooden frame house was nestled in the tree-lined hills overlooking the Beaver River.

George's father, a Toledo native also named Clair, was a quiet man with great reserve who trained as a dairy chemist and later worked with a Pennsylvania of-

fice of the Department of Agriculture. George's mother, Gene, was sharp and opinionated. Though he was close to both, George got his personality from his mother, friends say.

In the 1948 Beaver Falls High School yearbook is a striking photograph of the future spy. George is seated behind a drum set. His hair is falling over his forehead, partially obscuring one eye. His mouth is slightly agape, and he is wearing a bow tie, black-rimmed glasses and a dark suit. No one would mistake him for a young James Bond.

This is the red-headed teenager many remember. He was the first-chair drummer in the school orchestra and marching band, and at age 16, he joined the musicians' union and played in dance bands around Beaver Falls. Most memorable, friends say, were his appearances with the Tiger Swingsters swing band. "When he'd go off on some of those long solos," says classmate Don Marsh, "you thought you were looking at Gene Krupa. He'd be banging those drums all over the place, his hair flying all about, that bow tie." Even today, friends call him to answer their trivia questions about old songs and musicals. One remembers George returning to the Athens station from a visit to the United States loaded down with a complete collection of Frank Sinatra records.

In the class poll of 350 seniors, George finished in the top three in the categories "Most Popular," "Wittiest," "Most Musically Inclined," "Talents," "Most Versatile" and "Most Likely to Succeed." The seniors also had a sense of humor, ranking him second in the "Hair" category. "Red is lucky to be born with both wit and wisdom," read the caption beside his yearbook portrait.

The yearbook also called him a "politician": He was voted vice president and then president of the student council, and friends say it would not have surprised them if Clair George had grown up to become the congressman from Beaver Falls.

When he was 17, his father died of a heart attack, and the loss hit George hard. To support the family, his mother went to work in the Beaver Falls City Hall, becoming an administrative aide to the mayor. During the summers, George took a night job in a steel mill. It paid better than the day shift.

In 1949, he was accepted at Penn State, where he became vice president of his fraternity and president of the campus chapter of the secret society Skull and Bones. He also headed the forensic society, and spent hours researching and debating such topics as "Resolved: The United States government should nationalize all basic industries." As a senior, his

team won the Eastern Association debate championships at Princeton. "He had a great speaking voice," his debate coach recalls, "and a way of relating to his audience."

Deeply interested in world affairs, he majored in political science, and friends remember him discussing Marx and many socialist writers of the time. "He generally displayed a lot broader understanding and knowledge of political and social issues than most of us had," Marsh says.

After graduation in 1952, George enrolled in Columbia University Law School but did not attend, enlisting in the Army instead. He studied Chinese at the Army's language school in Monterey, Calif., then served in Japan and on the Ryukyu Islands with the Counterintelligence Corps. In 1955, impressed with several CIA officers he had met in the Far East, he joined the agency. He tells friends that he had two reasons for entering: patriotism and adventure.

LOOKING BACK ON THAT DECISION, IT'S important to remember that the CIA had a very different image in 1955 than it does today. Just eight years old, the agency was a vibrant place, with an elite leadership recruited mainly out of the Ivy League and the World War II Office of Strategic Services. A few years earlier, Director Allen Dulles had dramatically stood up to Sen. Joseph McCarthy's attacks on the CIA, and the agency was attracting some of the "most able lawyers, academicians and young, committed activists in the country," according to a congressional history published in 1976. George joined before the early wave of leaders retired, died or left. "It was fun," says Viets—"the most fun in town, or anywhere else for that matter."

There are not too many CIA officials from that era who could say they once worked in a steel mill, had their lunch pail nailed to a bench or had a burly steelworker crack them against a wall and demand they join the union—yet George fit right in. It may be that his non-patrician past, and the fact that he never forgot his small-town roots, helped him meld easily into different cultures and societies.

"Here was a guy with no social background," says Peter Sichel, an OSS veteran present at the CIA's creation and George's first station chief in Hong Kong. "He didn't grow up the way some of us had, in an environment with servants and with all kinds of other privileges, brushing shoulders with people who are well known. But he was totally at ease in whatever social environment he was in."

George and a group of young recruits shared a house in Rock Creek Park. When Marsh visited his high school friend, he

recalls, no one else would acknowledge for whom they worked. For someone as outgoing as you, Marsh remembers telling George, it will be hard keeping quiet about your work. "It *will* be frustrating," George agreed.

In August 1956, George got his first overseas assignment, in Hong Kong, the CIA's critical window into mainland China. U.S. intelligence had been so skewed at the time toward Europe and the Soviet Union that it was necessary to recruit people with different backgrounds. This was particularly true for China, which had no diplomatic relations with the United States and which was seen as the main threat in Asia.

"One day, somebody called me," Sichel recalls, "and said, 'Look, we've got this young officer who just joined us out of Army intelligence and he speaks fluent Chinese.' And in comes Clair George with his red hair and his shining face." He looked even younger than his 26 years.

The CIA station was in the American consulate, on a hill overlooking the harbor, a port of call for the Seventh Fleet. "It was a major, major outfit, and Peter Sichel and his station were top drawer," says William Brown, a Foreign Service officer there who later became U.S. ambassador to Israel. "That a guy like Clair was selected for a post like that as his

first assignment spoke from the beginning very well of him, in terms of his intellect, his dynamism, his drive."

"All these people were enormously committed, and the world was a very simple place," Sichel says. "We had the good guys and the bad guys. There was a considerable missionary zeal of 'We're trying to save the world from these two communist states,' and people like Clair George thought that volunteering or getting recruited by the CIA was sort of the finest thing a young man can do for his country."

George started on the bottom rung with a diplomatic cover of "political assistant." The principal task for the station's 18 or so officers was securing intelligence out of China by interviewing defectors and refugees. They also monitored Chinese intelligence activity in Hong Kong, where agents were known to be penetrating the police and other elements of society. George debriefed American tourists and foreign diplomats, Sichel says, and, with his fluency in Mandarin, worked to become a kind of "flypaper for any defectors who wanted to get in contact with us."

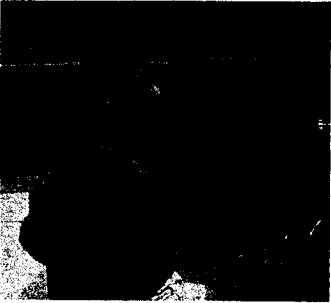
George thrived under Sichel. The two men spent hours on Sichel's junk, docked at the fishing village of Aberdeen, and, despite their differences in age and rank, grew close. "He was a charming young man, very open, and very anxious to learn and to absorb and make his mark," Sichel says. "He was a bit of a chameleon, would fit into any situation and was able to move very freely in that society."

George, a bachelor, was wild but discreet, and collected many friends. "He was quite a man about town," says fellow officer John Horton. The high school debate champ was also an excellent raconteur, and had the useful talent of being able to befriend women without seeming to pose a threat to their husbands.

In 1960, George was sent back to Washington for a brief stint between assignments. One day a request came in from overseas for a name to be traced, and a young operations officer, Mary Carlton Atkinson, was assigned to respond. It was the first cable she had ever drafted, and she asked George to review her work.

"He looked at it and probably looked at her too," a friend says. George then put the cable down and said with mock seriousness, "This is a very serious subject. We'll have to talk about this. Would you like to go to lunch?" Off they went, but it couldn't have been to discuss the cable: It was only two words long.

They were married in Wilmington, Del., where Mary's parents lived. In April 1961, they headed for Paris, where George, now 30, spent three years. It was the first and last glamorous posting



A rising star: top, a family Christmas in New Delhi in 1970—George with wife Mary, daughter Leslie, in-laws Ann and Charles Atkinson, and daughter Ann. In India, he oversaw the recruitment and running of Soviet and other foreign agents. Middle, at the helm of a motorboat on the Aegean Sea in 1977 and with Mary in Athens in 1979 during his tenure as the CIA station chief in Greece. Left, at William Casey's side as the CIA director testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee in 1983.

he would ever have. His cover was political officer, and he seems to have spent a great deal of time preparing for his next assignment, in West Africa.

"When I met him in Paris, he knew every black diplomat in town," says Sichel, who visited George after retiring from the agency. "He had the most extraordinary collection of black friends."

While in Paris, Mary, who had quit her agency position, gave birth to their first daughter, Leslie. Clair and Mary also fell in with a group of young Manhattan lawyers and bankers whose firms had sent them to Paris to gain international experience. The Georges were an attractive couple, says one of these friends, attorney Edward Hansen. "Everybody sort of liked to be with them."

In July 1964, George was assigned to Bamako, Mali. His diplomatic cover was economic officer, but in reality, at the age of 33, he had his first chief of station post.

CLAIR GEORGE ONCE TOLD HANSEN A parable that he said best summed up Africa. The tale, in fact, is one CIA people like to tell about many parts of the world—Vietnam, the Middle East—and it suggests a good deal about the real uncertainties of the officers' tasks, as well as their attitudes toward the countries where they operated.

As George told it, a scorpion asked a turtle for a ride across the Congo River. The turtle demurred, saying, "How do I know you're not going to sting me?"

"Don't worry," said the scorpion. "Ob-

viously, if I sting you, we both drown."

The turtle finally agreed, but halfway across, the scorpion lashed out and stung him. As the turtle began to sink, he looked up in despair and said, "How could you possibly do that?"

"That's Africa," came the reply.

Nevertheless, for the ambitious young officers of George's generation, Africa presented a great opportunity. The CIA's Africa Division had just been created, and new stations were popping up all over the continent.

Like many developing African nations, Mali itself did not count for very much in the grand scheme of things. But this was the height of the Cold War, when "containment" of the Soviets was the key to American foreign policy. "We saw Africa in those days as the area of competition," says a fellow station chief.

"George and I and a few others at that stage in our careers were very anxious to rise," says David Whipple, another Africa Division contemporary of George's, who had been stationed in the then-independent state of Katanga in the former Belgian Congo. "We wanted to pay our dues as operations officers, and we wanted to be in charge of field stations. We reckoned that the situation which had obtained in Southeast Asia in the late '50s was going to be duplicated in Africa—a lot of the countries were becoming newly independent and they were going to have to go through the same post-independence period of chaos—and the United States was going to be paying very close attention to what was going on.

"Therefore a desirable thing was to get a very active post in Africa, where your reporting would be noticed, your activities would be noticed, and you'd have a chance to shine."

Indeed, the Congo was a place where the CIA already had tried to influence events—just one example of the early flexing of its covert action capabilities. In the early '60s, it had plotted the murder of nationalist leader Patrice Lumumba, who was perceived as a threat by the United States because of his leftist rhetoric. The agency had trained two assassins and provided them with biological toxins, but before they could act, Lumumba was killed, according to some accounts, by supporters of his rival, Joseph Mobutu. Mobutu, now president of Zaire, reportedly has been a key CIA contact since 1960.

Mali, a landlocked former French colony in West Africa, didn't have the same level of intrigue as the Congo. But the Soviets and China were making a play for Mali's president, Modibo Keita, a Marxist-inspired nationalist who had received the Lenin Prize from Moscow and a Mao

jacket from the Chinese. The Soviets were Mali's principal military supplier, and several hundred East Bloc "technicians" worked there.

"You could say, who cares?" says William J. Foltz, a Yale University professor of African studies and political science, who was in Mali at the time. "But we were going anyplace, bearing any burden in those days." One U.S. ambassador to Mali, Foltz says, even devised a scenario of how World War III would begin in that obscure nation.

George's willingness to go to Bamako enhanced his reputation within the agency. "Mali isn't exactly Miami Beach. You ask for some place like that and it shows you're interested in duty, not pleasure," says John Waller, deputy chief of the Africa Division at the time. During George's stay, Mary flew to Paris to give birth to the couple's second daughter, Ann.

Running the Bamako station, which consisted of a handful of officers, gave George experience he could not have duplicated in a European station. The intellectual circles were small and easy to crack, and you never knew which of your friends might someday run the country. What's more, as a fellow officer explains, "In those days in Africa, not only were you a big fish in a small pond, you were able to rub up against any nation on the face of the earth."

George worked to develop contacts among Soviet and Chinese diplomats, intelligence officers and military personnel who passed through. The theory was, if the KGB was unhappy with some code clerk or cryptographer in Moscow, what better place to banish him to than Bamako? And where better for the CIA to try to recruit such a demoralized person?

George "established himself early on as a very aggressive, can-do operations officer," says Cannistraro, who was then in the Africa Division. But his stay in Bamako ended abruptly two years after he arrived.

One day in 1966 he was warned by a high-level intelligence source, apparently in the Mali security services, that he was about to be declared *persona non grata*. He'd been detected meeting with government intelligence officers, which had offended other government officials previously unaware of George's CIA status.

Being declared PNG is the last thing a CIA officer wants; it can mean being publicly branded a spy and losing a carefully constructed cover. George was on a plane before the day was out, avoiding the PNG stigma and leaving Mary and the children to follow separately.

In Washington, he visited an Africa Division official. "How much damage has this done to me?" George asked. "Very

little," the official replied. "You got out. No publicity attached. This would not affect your career."

"He had sufficient prestige based on solid achievement so that he didn't unduly suffer," the official explains today. "Another guy who hadn't such prestige could have been washed out right away."

FAR FROM BEING SET BACK BY THE African stint, George's career was rolling. He went next to New Delhi, another Third World post where the great U.S.-Soviet game was being played out.

As India had turned more toward Moscow for weapons and support, relations with Washington had grown more tense. George was given the cover of a political-economic officer, and a friend remembers him writing embassy dispatches, attending staff meetings, "swanning around . . . seeing people in Indian life on quite harmless subjects." In reality, he was head of operations, meaning he oversaw the recruitment and running of Soviet and other foreign agents.

In 1971, George was promoted again, to the sensitive post of chief of operations-external in the Soviet Division at CIA headquarters. There he supervised the recruitment and running of all Soviet agents outside the Soviet Union and East Bloc. It was a crucial time for the Soviet

Division, which was emerging from the big chill of the Angleton years. James Angleton, the legendary chief of counterintelligence, had become convinced that most Soviet defectors were plants by Moscow and could not be trusted, and a number of CIA observers have described this as a time when the agency's recruitment of Soviet agents was crippled. This contention is disputed by some agency officials, but it is clear that much harm was done. And George, now 41, was one of the key people chosen to help get Soviet operations moving again.

"They wanted a bright fresh guy, a proven recruiter, a guy who knew operations . . . in the new era," says one veteran officer.

Then, in mid-1975, he was rewarded with his first major station chief's job: Beirut.

At the time, Beirut was a prestigious post, a wide-open environment where far-flung operations could be run with less danger of detection than in, say, Saudi Arabia or Israel. Arabs from more rigidly Islamic countries came to Beirut and let their hair down. The city was also a hotbed of Soviet activity and held major potential for recruitments. Perhaps most important, it was a window on the burgeoning terrorism movement. At first, that was George's major focus.

Only months after his arrival, however, the Lebanese civil war erupted. By 1976, chaos reigned: Gangs of armed men roamed the streets, and hundreds of people were being killed or wounded in clashes between warring factions. There were abductions of some U.S. officials; the embassy and CIA station began to evacuate families, and eventually officers themselves. George, whose family went to stay with friends in Greece, began to change his location every night or so.

L. Dean Brown, who was sent to Lebanon as a special envoy for two months in 1976, recalled arriving to find himself in a war zone: Buildings were being blown up, and indiscriminate shelling made every step treacherous. A number of American families who had left Lebanon had turned their keys over to the embassy, and George and Brown lived out of their suitcases, changing apartments every couple of nights. They would often stay in one until the refrigerator was empty, then find another place in which to hole up.

There was an art to survival in Beirut, Brown says: You never took the same route twice, didn't tell your driver your destination until after you were in your seat and bribed your way through roadblocks (there were about 20 on the way to the airport alone). George and Brown, accompanied by a couple of Arab-speaking bodyguards, occasionally ventured out



The gathering storm: clockwise from above, George with daughters Ann and Leslie and wife Mary in the summer of 1986. Relaxing at the home of an old friend in his home town of Beaver Falls, Pa., in the autumn of 1989. Tending to the lawn of his Bethesda home in July of last year, two months before his indictment in connection with the Iran-contra affair. At a news conference—the first the spymaster had ever given—on his front lawn after his September 6 indictment. On the way to his September 12 arraignment.



to dinner, going to shuttered restaurants, knocking on the door and persuading nervous owners to open up.

Through it all, George was able to run "a functioning section," Brown says. The CIA had by then penetrated the Lebanese factions, and one of its relationships—as Bob Woodward reported in *Veil*—was with Bashir Gemayel, the powerful head of the Christian Phalangist militia, who was assassinated in a 1982 car bombing shortly after being elected president of Lebanon.

But with the focus on counterterrorism, a more important CIA source was Ali Hassan Salameh, security chief for Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat and former operations head for Black September, the Palestinian terrorist group responsible for the 1972 massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. Salameh provided intelligence to CIA officials in Beirut until 1979, when he was assassinated by the Israelis.

The chaos and the killings seemed endless. "In Beirut," George confided later to a friend, "everyone has an agenda and a gun—and the agenda can go in any direction, and the gun can shoot in any direction."

BACK IN THE UNITED STATES, MEANwhile, critics were saying the CIA itself was out of control. Vietnam and Watergate had made the nation suspicious of secrecy, wary of government lies. Congress had undertaken investigations, headed by Sen. Frank Church and Rep. Otis Pike, of CIA excesses, including the assassination plots overseas (most notoriously against Fidel Castro) and the use of LSD on unsuspecting subjects. Two decades after Clair George had signed up for a life of "patriotism and adventure," the agency's glamorous image had been severely tarnished.

In the middle of all this came the assassination of Richard Welch.

It was late in December 1975, and Welch, the CIA's station chief in Athens, was returning home after a Christmas party at the ambassador's residence. He was accosted by masked gunmen outside his house, and shot to death. Shortly afterward, George was asked to replace him.

Coming from Beirut, one colleague says, George was probably the single person in the CIA who could honestly say that stepping into the Athens job would be less dangerous than staying in his current post. But it wasn't without plenty of danger. Welch had been identified, targeted, and followed by his assassins for some time. They had not been caught, and might strike again. George "came in under the most difficult circumstances imaginable," says Monteagle Stearns, an embassy official at the time, and he "was absolutely cool and calm."

He arrived in the summer of 1976, and his first decisions concerned security. The U.S. ambassador had an armed driver and a tail car with two armed guards, but after some consideration, George elected to drive a VW Beetle.

He also chose not to increase security at his house, which was near where Welch had lived. John Blake, then the CIA's deputy director for administration, remembers sitting with George on the front porch. "All of a sudden, I noticed there was absolutely nothing between the porch and the street: no wall, no fence, no hedge, no nothing. I said, 'My friend, you're sitting here with a target pinned on your chest. Get yourself a fence or hedge or something. For God's sakes, I'm going inside.'"

But George was taking a calculated risk: It wasn't clear the assassins knew who he was, and increasing security might draw attention. His philosophy, Stearns says, was, "Don't create a fortress; don't create a prison for Americans; otherwise, close down the embassy. If you can't do your job and take an element of risk, you shouldn't be there."

George got high marks for stabilizing the situation in Athens. In addition to the Welch assassination probe and the usual third-country recruitments, he had to concern himself with the agency's role in Greece. For years the CIA had had a reputation—often deserved—for keeping a hand in most events in Greece. Greek politicians didn't run for office, it was said, without first checking in with the CIA. "You had the assassination of a station chief. You had to ask yourself: What was behind that?" says Robert McCloskey, the ambassador to Greece during part of George's tour.

McCloskey credits George with helping to lower the agency's profile during

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CLAIR GEORGE

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this period, and for supporting his determination to open a dialogue with the political opposition after a period without contact. Says Stearns: "He had a good feeling for Greece, was moderate in his judgments of other people, did not view the world in black and white, was not a militant Cold Warrior. On the contrary, he seemed to me to always see the shading in things."

During his time in Greece, George became close friends with Joe Alex Morris, a Los Angeles Times reporter considered the dean of American correspondents in the Middle East. The Georges and the Morris lived near each other; Mary George and Ulla Morris played tennis together; both couples had young children.

Early in the morning on February 10, 1979, George received a call from a mutual friend saying that Morris, who had gone to Tehran to report on the Iranian revolution, had been caught in cross-fire and killed. George rushed to Morris's house, only to discover that Ulla had left for a day ski trip. Her 11- and 13-year-old daughters were munching on cereal, preparing to attend a basketball game.

George broke the news and the girls dashed to their rooms. He spent the rest of the day hunting Ulla down by phone.

"Clair, why on earth are you in my house?" Ulla said when she finally called back.

"There's been an accident. Joe is dead," George replied. She rushed home to find that Clair and Mary had taken charge. "Talk to your children. That's the first thing you should do," George told her.

After Morris's body was recovered, George helped Ulla, who was not an American citizen, relocate to the United States. At a subsequent get-together of Morris's friends, George broke down as he talked about him.

Says Ulla: "The Clair I know can be tough. In operations I'm sure he is tough. On the other hand there is the Clair I know who is soft and gentle and can cry."

IN THE SUMMER OF 1979, THREE YEARS after he had arrived in Athens, George returned to Washington for good. A promotions panel for senior officers ranked him first out of more than 100 candidates, according to one panel member, and it was time for him to run a division. After 24 years, he was leaving physical danger behind and stepping into a less familiar kind of cross-fire.

He was put in charge of Africa, which the Carter administration had made one focus of its diplomacy. George's platter was full: There was the civil war in Angola, where the CIA had been barred

from covert action but continued to monitor the fighting; the guerrilla war in Rhodesia; the changing alliances in the Horn; the need for constant stroking of contacts like President Mobutu in Zaire. In the fall of 1979, a U.S. surveillance satellite detected a nuclear explosion off the coast of South Africa, leading to questions about that country's intentions. And in the spring of 1980, George had to go to Liberia to meet that country's new leader, Sgt. Samuel K. Doe, who had engineered a violent coup that had killed the Liberian president—a close American ally—and dozens of others. The CIA had a key communications relay facility in Liberia, so George had to forge a relationship with the thuggish Doe. The moral ambiguity involved was typical of intelligence work: As one colleague put it, "You sup with the devil, but you use a long spoon."

The Africa Division was actively recruiting during this period, and Richard M. Moose, assistant secretary of state for African affairs at the time, says he argued unsuccessfully against several recruitments proposed to him by George. In one such case involving Mozambique, Moose says, the operation backfired, damaging relations and complicating the southern Africa strategy of the incoming Reagan administration. A CIA officer who worked under George at the time says that this kind of thing is part of the game, and that the State Department was far too cautious.

In 1981, Ronald Reagan became president, and his campaign manager, William Casey, became director of the CIA. The appointment of Casey, an OSS veteran, was the beginning of a more aggressive era in covert operations—and the turning point in Clair George's career.

Shortly after Casey's appointment, the new director, in a move that stunned and alarmed agency veterans, picked an outsider—business executive Max Hugel, a longtime friend—to run the Operations Directorate. Then, perhaps because Hugel was an outsider, Casey appointed two deputies for him: John Stein, the Brussels station chief, and George. When Hugel's tenure ended abruptly several months later under a cloud surrounding his financial dealings, Stein took Hugel's place and George remained as the sole operations deputy.

George admired Casey, but he ran into trouble almost immediately. The director regularly summoned officers below George and Stein for closed-door meetings, ordering tasks or operations to be carried out. Finally, George went to Casey's deputy, retired admiral Bobby Inman.

"He and John Stein were very frustrated," Inman says. "His pitch to me was, would I press Casey to instruct regional

chiefs that they should debrief [George and Stein about] whatever Casey told them." George kept a sense of humor about the situation, joking to Inman that after a career of collecting intelligence on the other side, he now had "to collect on what his *own* people were doing."

In 1982, Inman, who by then had left the agency, got another call from George, who had been asked to run the CIA's liaison office with Congress. It was George's first public position with the agency, not something he was accustomed to. It would mean, among other things, holding Casey's hand when he testified on the Hill, and Casey had already alienated some members of the oversight committees. George was wary. How should he deal with Congress? he asked Inman.

"My advice was candor: Be direct, get there fast with bad news," Inman says. "He asked a lot of questions. He was clearly finding out what, in my judgment, it would take for the guy in that job to be successful."

But everything Inman suggested ran counter to Casey's instincts. "So he did what his boss wanted," Inman says, "and it turned into a disaster."

The biggest blowup came in the spring of 1984, when Casey was accused of concealing from the Senate Intelligence Committee the covert mining of harbors in Nicaragua as part of the secret war against the Sandinistas. Sen. Barry Goldwater, the committee chairman, dashed off an angry letter to Casey, and Sen. Moynihan temporarily resigned as vice chairman in protest.

Goldwater's staff director, Rob Simmons, a former CIA officer himself, says that George cannot escape blame for failing to keep the committee informed.

"It became clear that Clair had not been straightforward in his dealings with me and his dealings with the chairman, that he had withheld information from us both," Simmons says. "My question to him was: Do you mean to tell me that you knew nothing of these events? That you sat in on none of these meetings?"

According to Simmons, George acknowledged knowing about the mining operation but said it was the State Department's responsibility to keep Congress informed, because the mining had been the brainstorm of CIA officer Duane "Dewey" Clarridge in his role as part of a State Department working group.

Simmons corrected George. It was the agency's responsibility, he said. *Your* responsibility.

"I felt betrayed by him. We felt Casey and Clair George had willingly and wittingly taken advantage of our good offices," Simmons says today.

Others see it differently. Victoria

Toensing, then the Intelligence Committee's chief counsel, says George was operating under difficult circumstances and had to "put out the fires" behind Casey. Moynihan too says he had no problem with George during this period, and puts the blame "across the river" with Casey. Rep. Edward Boland, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, says he always found George to be "someone you can believe."

But another committee staff member disagrees. George, he says, had everyone fooled, and viewed the Hill the same way he saw the Soviet Union—"as a 'hard target' . . . These people were to be manipulated and exploited . . . in any way possible, including surreptitious conversations and misinformation, and whatever else you pulled out of your bag of tricks."

"That's why Casey liked him so much," the staff member says.

In July 1984, two months after the harbor-mining fiasco, Casey named George to the top job in the Operations Directorate.

TWO YEARS LATER, GEORGE WAS BACK on the Hill to answer questions about another covert operation gone wrong—this time one run by Oliver North. On October 5, 1986, a C-123K cargo plane carrying arms and supplies to the contras was downed by the Sandinistas. A captured crew member, Eugene Hasenfus, told a news conference that he had been working with some CIA employees in the operation to resupply the contras. U.S. military aid to the contras had been prohibited by Congress, and in the days that followed, George and other government officials appeared before congressional committees looking into the incident.

On October 10, George told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that "we do not know the individuals involved in this affair, which led to the downing of the airplane." Asked later if he knew retired Air Force major general Richard Secord, who was working for North in the operation, George replied, "I do not know the man."

On October 14, George went before the House Intelligence Committee and made an even stronger denial of CIA involvement. "First," he said, "I would like to state categorically that the Central Intelligence Agency was not involved, directly or indirectly, in arranging, directing or facilitating resupply missions conducted by private individuals" in support of the contras.

Rep. Lee Hamilton asked whether George was speaking for the entire U.S. government. George said no. "Mr. Chairman, I cannot speak for the United States government. I can speak for the Central Intelligence Agency."

Another CIA official present, Alan Fi-

ers, who ran the Central American task force under George, testified that the agency was aware of some aspects of the ostensibly private resupply operation, "but as to who was flying the flights and who was behind them, we do not know."

"And you still don't?" Hamilton asked.

"No," Fiers said.

"No, sir," George added. "What we know at this point is . . . from the press."

Elliott Abrams, the State Department's assistant secretary for inter-American affairs, was even more resolute in his denial. Asked by Hamilton whether anyone could assure the committee that the United States government was not involved, indirectly or directly, in any way in supplying the contras, Abrams responded: "The answer to your question is yes."

It was, of course, not the full story.

One year later, George acknowledged as much. The Iran-contra affair had exploded, and Congress was holding hearings. George appeared to testify in closed session and was read his "categorical" denial from the 1986 hearing. He tried to explain himself: He had answered the questions very narrowly, he explained. The CIA as an *institution* had not organized the Hasenfus flight or other private benefactor activities, and he had wanted to emphasize that lack of institutional involvement. Then he said he was sorry. "Yes, you are right—reading it legally and tightly—and I will apologize."

Why didn't he correct the record when Abrams made his even more sweeping comments? he was asked.

"I was surprised that Abrams made that statement," George said. "It was so categorical. The question is, 'Should I leap up and say, Hold it, Elliott? . . . I didn't have the guts to do it.'"

Later, Republican Sen. William Cohen of Maine pressed George further: "Why not?" he asked.

George said he'd been "almost megalomaniacal in trying to prove one thing—that we were not involved in that activity because it would have been illegal." He saw his mission as trying to protect the agency, he said, acknowledging that in doing so, he had "perceived my charter too small."

He said that as Abrams had made his sweeping denial of any U.S. government involvement, this thought had crossed his mind: "Excuse me, Elliott, but maybe you are the only guy in town that hasn't heard this news."

Cohen told George that in his "megalomaniacal desire to protect the agency . . . you may have, in fact, undermined its credibility" with Congress.

"I deeply appreciate what you are saying," George replied.

George apologized again to Cohen and the rest of the committee "for any impli-

cation that I was misleading the committee. My intent, which may or may not excuse me, was above all . . . to make the point that the Central Intelligence Agency as an entity was not involved. I was so concerned about us, the CIA, as I testified, [and] our Operations Directorate . . . I don't picture myself as a witness—and I have been a witness on and off, sir, for eight years—interrupting someone, and saying, 'That is not right.'"

Taking note of press reports that he had lied to Congress, George added, "I don't lie, and I did not mean to lie."

George's supporters say his contriteness demonstrates his good faith, that he never intended to lie to Congress, that he was trying to protect the CIA from a scandal not of its own creation. Independent counsel Walsh clearly does not believe this.

As evidence, he has cited George's own statements and also testimony from Fiers, who last summer decided to cooperate with Walsh and pleaded guilty to two misdemeanor counts of withholding information from Congress. (Fiers has since been sentenced to 100 hours of community service and one year of probation.)

For example, George was charged with making a false statement, a felony, in connection with his October 14 testimony, in which he agreed with Fiers's assertion that they did not know who was "behind" the contra resupply flights. George knew that North and others were behind the operation, Walsh alleges.

George was charged with making another false statement for claiming in his October 10 testimony that he did not know Secord. Walsh cites a meeting eight months earlier in the White House situation room, where George allegedly met Secord during discussions about the secret Iran initiative.

But the crux of Walsh's case against George may be the testimony of Fiers, who appeared with George at the October 14 hearing. Fiers, who helped prepare George's opening statement, now alleges that George told him that certain facts were not to be conveyed to the congressional committees because they would "turn the spotlight" on the role of North and the administration in the resupply operation. George has been charged with one count of obstruction of justice in connection with this. (As this story went to press, it appeared likely that this charge and another obstruction of justice charge would be dropped, but that George would be reindicted on both charges in a slightly altered form.)

Who is right?

Many in the intelligence community who back George are troubled by Fiers's decision to turn on him, but Fiers's sup-

porters say his critics are angry because he has broken the code of silence.

In his recent book, *A Very Thin Line*, the historian Theodore Draper writes: "The cases of George and Fiers show how loyalties and self-interest influenced behavior. The rules of the game did not motivate them to demonstrate a higher degree of civic courage, which might have embarrassed their agency and endangered their careers if they had spoken up more clearly and candidly. They were products of a system that rewarded 'team play' and 'CYA' (cover your ass)."

Fiers, a former Ohio State football star who earlier served in the Middle East for the CIA, testified during the confirmation hearings for new CIA Director Robert Gates that during the period of Iran-contra, top CIA officials, including himself, felt embattled and were acting in "an atmosphere of polarization, distrust and self-doubt."

He spoke of being caught in a "giant nutcracker," with the administration on one side and Congress on the other. Consensus, he said, "had given way to a bare-knuckles game of politics, a no-holds-barred game where no quarter was given on either side."

"I could have been more forthcoming," Fiers had earlier testified at the Iran-contra hearings, "but I frankly was not going to be the first person to step up and do that. You may call that a cowardly decision, some may call it a brave decision; it is a controversial decision. But so long as others who knew the details as much as I—who knew more than I—were keeping their silence on this, I was going to keep my silence."

George's supporters say Fiers is lying, that he has already changed his own story so often that he cannot be believed, that he fingered George only to save himself.

In his own testimony to Congress in 1987 about the Iran-contra affair, George depicted himself as a good soldier, almost the loyal opposition—someone who repeatedly lodged complaints with Casey about North's operation, and was kept out of the loop ("playing the fool," as George once put it). He acknowledged, however, that he never tried to put a halt to North's dubious activity.

"At no time—which maybe I should have—did I dash into the director's office and say, 'Hey, Bill, we have got to stop all this stuff,'" George testified.

George said he always was thinking of the law, particularly given the legal prohibition on military aid to the contras. "Coming out of a congressional job gave me a different approach than many guys in the directorate, in that I appreciated the dynamics of the Congress, I appreciated the opposition . . . But this was the law of the land."

Once North complained to Vincent Cannistraro about George. "I think that he felt that Clair was a reluctant participant," Cannistraro says, someone who would do only the minimum and then only grudgingly. "Clair was under orders by Casey to support Ollie, and so he would do that." North, he recalls, once showed him a camera he had obtained for a trip he was about to take, saying, "Look at this piece of crap Clair gave me."

George's lawyers have argued in court papers that George, as director of operations, was involved with so much else beyond Iran-contra that he could not possibly have known as much operational detail as he is alleged to have failed to disclose to the congressional committees. And there's no question George had a lot to keep track of during his 3½-year tenure.

He was a big-league intelligence bureaucrat now, running a worldwide directorate of some 2,500 people, managing a budget that exceeded \$1 billion. Beyond Central America, there were other covert programs to manage, including Afghanistan and Angola (where the CIA could now operate again), as well as smaller anti-communist resistance operations in Ethiopia and Cambodia. Eastern Europe was an increasing focus of operations. In Beirut, hostages were being taken, including CIA station chief William Buckley, who later died in captivity. In 1985, George had to deal with fallout from the notorious "Year of the Spy," in which people with names like Pollard, Felton, Walker, Whitworth, Howard and Chin were discovered peddling American secrets. There was also the dramatic defection of KGB officer Vitaly Yurchenko, whose equally dramatic redefection to Moscow prompted strong criticism of the agency. There were flaps over the bugging of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow; the leaks of classified operations to the press; and the revelation in 1987, from a defecting Cuban major, that many Cubans working for U.S. intelligence were actually double agents serving Castro.

Still, the covert war in Nicaragua hovered over everything else. And especially when it came to the contra operation, George seems to have accepted that working for Casey meant operating in his shadow.

Testifying at last fall's confirmation hearings for Gates, Alan Fiers gave a vivid illustration of the surreal atmosphere Casey had created at the agency. Shortly after taking the job as head of the CIA's Central American task force, Fiers said, he had been summoned to Casey's office. North and George were also present.

Casey had looked at North and said, "Ollie, Alan tells me you're operat-

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ing in Central America . . . Are you?"
"No," North had replied.

"Good, I want you to understand that you're not to operate in Central America," Casey had said.

Later, Fiers testified, George had told him that he had just witnessed a "charade"—that "sometime in the dark of the night," Casey had told Ronald Reagan, "I'll take care of Central America. Just leave it to me."

"And I looked at Clair," Fiers said. "I said, 'Jesus Christ, Clair, if that's true, this will be worse than Watergate if it ever comes out in the open.'"

"And Clair just said—shook his head—and he said essentially that's not a problem.

"From that point forward," Fiers said, "I knew my universe. I understood where we were, and I made the decision because I believed in the cause, I believed in what we were doing . . . The United States could not afford another fiasco . . . I remember very clearly sitting on the couch with my father, and telling him, 'Dad, I don't think I'll come through this with my career intact.'"

George has not commented on this account, but he did tell congressional Iran-contra investigators in 1987: "This is not the first administration and will not be the last that becomes totally frustrated with its spy service." At some point, he said, the CIA director is inclined to cut out his own people, saying, "I am going to set up an operation and I am going to run it around these bureaucrats."

IN MAY 1987, WILLIAM CASEY DIED. His replacement was FBI Director William Webster. "Cleaning Up Casey's Mess," read one headline on a Newsweek cover, suggesting the task that lay ahead. Webster appointed a special counsel to review the agency's role in the "mess."

Part of the "mess" had already been taken care of, as several officers from the Operations Directorate took retirement and others involved in the contra affair were forced to resign. There was some bitterness toward George and other top CIA officials like Gates because of this, a feeling that lower level officers were being sacrificed to congressional pressure when they should have been protected. Bodies were being "snatched up and thrown under the wheels of that onrushing congressional train," says James L. Adkins, a base commander in Honduras who was suspended and forced to resign.

The internal probe did not implicate George in any wrongdoing. But in December, he was summoned to see Webster and got a surprise.

The new director said it was time for a change in Operations. He wanted someone from a new generation who could

take over and have a fresh start, not spend all his time defending his previous actions. George, he would explain later, "had a certain flamboyance and style that really was unique . . . Clair belonged to a leadership style that existed when the CIA ran independent operations across the world." But those were looser times, and the agency had different requirements now.

Webster began to offer George another job in the agency, but George shook him off.

"He said, 'No.' He thought it was best to retire, and he said he'd make it easy for me," Webster says. "He just sort of put up his hand: 'It's time for me to go.'"

George's 33-year career in the CIA had come to an end. Friends say he sank into a period of depression, then rebounded, took some consulting jobs, spent more time with his family.

Then, last September 6, came the indictment heard round the intelligence world.

That afternoon, as reporters and TV crews sprouted on his lawn, clumps of puzzled Bethesda neighbors formed to observe the commotion. George appeared at his front door wearing a look of discomfort, a man from the shadows getting used to the light. Then he walked to the row of microphones and spoke deliberately and calmly. "I've just been officially informed that I've been indicted," he said, "and what I'd like to do is read a statement, and I'll read it slow."

It was the first news conference George had ever given.

He called himself a political pawn and described his conscience as clear. Then he took a few questions.

Had a plea bargain been offered?

George wouldn't say.

What about the toll on him and his family?

"What can I do? I live here. I'm a citizen of this community, as you are. I must continue my personal life."

The reporters pressed him.

"I mean, I've been in a few complicated situations, with much more dangerous people than you are," George said with a slight smile. "You're not shooting."

Then his tone changed. "Well, it's not an attractive situation at all. I'm certainly not calm inside. But that's the way the cards played."

WITH THE TRIAL OF CLAIR GEORGE LESS than two months away, the debate about his case continues.

"It does strike one as bizarre," says former director Richard Helms, the last CIA official to be prosecuted for withholding information from Congress, "that individuals who genuinely believed and can prove that they were following higher

authority, the orders of their commander in chief or the director of central intelligence, should be legally persecuted. It leaves one really with a sense of damage done, and improperly so."

A CIA officer's "whole training is to keep secrets," says a former State Department official who is intimately familiar with George's work. "And I just hope we have not put somebody in a position where everything they are trained to do then gets them in trouble with the law. If you've done that, it seems to me as much the government's failure as the individual's."

"Clair had a definite sense of proportion about himself and the agency and the human condition, if you will," says Graham Fuller, a former CIA operative who later, as national intelligence officer for the Middle East, wrote the intelligence estimate on Iran on which the White House based its overtures to Tehran. "Some would have called it cynicism. I think it was more: I think it was a sense of humanity and an ability to laugh at the foibles of the whole structure.

"That's why I think it's particularly unfortunate that the buck seems to have come to rest on Clair's desk—because he, more than most people, would have been aware of the tremendous pitfalls of covert operations and the shifting and complex relationship between CIA and Congress, CIA and the White House. He was the rare professional who distrusted the 'cowboys' and the 'true believers' . . . That makes it particularly poignant that he seems to be the one taking the biggest rap."

Rob Simmons, the ex-CIA officer who later worked for Goldwater on the Senate Intelligence Committee, has a less sympathetic view. It may be a tragedy that a Cold War hero like George is being punished by the government he served so well, Simmons says, "but the bottom line is you can be a good soldier in the Cold War and a very bad American. This is true of Ollie North, and I think it is true of Clair George. You get so obsessed with the Cold War and the battles you're fighting for democracy that you lose sight of what democracy is all about."

Says Richard Moose, the former Carter State Department official: "George was one of those possessed of the notion that the intelligence service has an overriding dispensation for its special role. Casey was a fanatical extreme of this, as was North. But more and more, little by little, George and some other agency professionals developed a disdain for the law, particularly civilian political constraints, and they, in their own mind, very easily justified actions that went beyond the bounds of policy."

Meanwhile, people who knew George

early in his career express a more personal kind of concern.

Edward Hansen, the friend from George's Paris days, says he felt guilty when he heard about the indictment. Most of the lawyers and bankers in their circle went on to become partners in major law firms or executives of financial institutions, own two or three homes and have been "excessively compensated."

"Everybody is now wealthy," Hansen says. "I'm retiring, and my dilemma is whether I go to Aspen or Palm Beach. Clair, who has devoted his entire life to the government—his dilemma is bankruptcy defending himself, or possibly jail. That's what I have trouble reconciling."

Hansen recalls George's parable of the scorpion and the turtle. "That's Africa," George told him, ending the tale. But Hansen believes that is also George's predicament. You went to work for the CIA and you entered a world where betrayal, risk and tragedy were part of the deal.

In Los Angeles, when Ulla Morris heard the news, she felt torn. She abhorred the Iran-contra mess. She didn't want to hear that George had been accused of lying to Congress. Even if you were under orders, she felt, you didn't break the law. That was unacceptable. That wasn't the Clair she knew.

But did she really know him? Could anyone really know a spy? Close as they were, there had always been a wall between them. *Why hadn't he quit? Where does my friend fit in?* she thought as she read the news accounts. Running clandestine operations for the CIA meant making hard decisions, awful decisions, she says now. "I hate to think of how he made those decisions. Could he just close his eyes? Did he say, 'It doesn't matter what happens, as long as it's good for the agency, or good for America?'"

She wrote him a letter: Friendship came first, she decided. He had helped her in a time of need, and she would be there for him.

But she had trouble when she tried to explain her position to her daughters, particularly the 27-year-old, who remembers George as the bearer of bad news in Athens. The daughter had no love for the CIA. She had opposed the Reagan policies toward Central America with a passion, had gone to work to help Central American refugees, women from Nicaragua and El Salvador. She couldn't understand why her mother was sticking by Clair George.

Morris had only one answer for her: "I try to tell her there are shades of gray between the black and white." ■

Benjamin Weiser is a reporter on The Post's Investigative staff. Staff researcher Lucy Shackelford contributed to this article.

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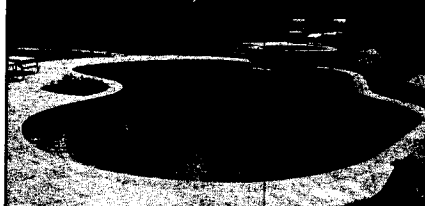
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