

Post 4/6/96

Magic Carpet Ride

The most bizarre comment at the Senate intelligence committee hearings came from the acting director of the CIA, Adm. William O. Studeman. Before the two widows of victims of subsidized political murder in Guatemala, he suggested we should be grateful to goons.

"I would like to observe," he said, with the self-righteousness of the disgraced, "that the U.S. government and the Guatemalan authorities would have a far less complete picture of the fates of [Michael] DeVine or [Efrain] Bamaca [Velasquez] had it not been for CIA and overall intelligence community reporting."

That was true, but not a cause for gratitude on the part of American taxpayers. The CIA's hirelings were excellent sources for "insights" into the murders they had perpetrated. But Jennifer Harbury, the fragile, gutsy lawyer who nagged and fasted until authorities told her what happened to her soldier-husband, a peasant leader in the Guatemalan civil war, didn't seem to feel she owed the agency anything. Nor did Carole DeVine, whose American husband was kidnapped, tortured and nearly decapitated by thugs who included Julio Roberto Alpirez, the same colonel who according to an eyewitness bent over the torture table of Efrain Bamaca.

Exactly why the hearings were held is something of a mystery. They got terrible simultaneous reviews from committee members of both parties. If Chairman Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) had any reason beyond the fact that he is a candidate for president and Rep. Robert G. Torricelli (D-N.J.) is getting all the play about the dark and grisly doings, Specter was unable to articulate it satisfactorily.

Specter came into national prominence for his ferocious, bared-teeth questioning of Anita F. Hill at the Clarence Thomas hearings. He was a different human being with Adm. Studeman. He constituted a one-man witness protection program, excusing the acting director from answering even a question he was willing to take on, if not exactly answer. A small and chilly man, Studeman repeatedly uttered his mantra, "sources and methods," to inhibit questioners. He was anxious to defer to the State Department, which was represented by Alexander F. Watson, an assistant secretary of state, who was totally unable to further the fiction that State was running the policy and knew what the CIA was doing. He alternated between being huffy and hapless.

"I do not know exactly how DeVine died, I was not there," he said, at one point; and at another, when asked when he learned of DeVine's death, "Don't pin me down on that."

DeVine was a "jolly green giant" of a man, who chose to live in Guatemala and entertain at his inn equally impassioned environmentalists. He antagonized the touchy military, apparently by some kind of weapons possession. They did not hesitate to eliminate him "with extreme prejudice" as the CIA put it in Vietnam days.

Sen. William S. Cohen (R-Maine) led off the reviews by calling the hearings "a little premature." He also said plainly to Adm. Studeman that the CIA had "misled" and "lied to" the committee. The agency had simply failed to report to its "oversight" committees that DeVine had been murdered by Guatemalan military with CIA ties. Nor did the CIA pass along the intriguing information that a Captain Contreras, who was tried and convicted for the crime, mysteriously walked out of his prison cell and hasn't been heard from since. The CIA told the National Security Council, the State Department, the Department of Defense, the Justice Department—and for all we know, the Department of Transportation. But they overlooked the oversight committees, which have overlooked so much of what the CIA has done over the years.

It was not deliberate, the admiral said several times. "It slipped under the carpet," he said vaguely. Why, he had a list of committees to be notified, he told Sen. Richard C. Shelby, the new Republican from Alabama. Said Shelby, a little facetiously for a card-carrying conservative, "That must have been a large carpet."

Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.), usually the politest man at any senatorial gathering, was furious. He had come to ask questions about policy, about the insane judgments to "finance and protect criminals" in Guatemala. He yelled at Watson.

Maybe he found out in the closed session.

Will anything change as a result of the Guatemala horrors? History says no. The Republicans, for many reasons, cherish the CIA, which shares the party's barely concealed assumption that the Cold War is not really over. House Speaker Newt Gingrich, in an off-the-mark shot worthy of the agency, has fingered whistle-blower Torricelli as the real villain in the case. The speaker wants to expand the CIA. Sometimes he says things he thinks people are not listening to.

■ PROBATION FOR THE AU PAIR

An au pair was convicted of misdemeanor child abuse in the shaking death of a Loudoun County infant. *Page D1*

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