

Ex-Intelligence Agents Gather to Discuss

By Benjamin Weiser
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It could have been a scene from a spy movie: A group of intelligence operatives huddled around a portable radio on the porch of a Falls Church hotel.

But in fact, the listeners were members of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers slipping outside to get the latest news on the Senate hearings on Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas.

The hearings were only a minor distraction for the former spies and others who had served in U.S. intelligence and who gathered here Friday and yesterday after a most extraordinary summer for the CIA.

It was a season that saw new allegations of CIA coverups and bad intelligence analysis and the collapse of the Soviet Union, a

development that deprived the agency of its historic analytic target.

"It's hard to assimilate all the change," said John Blake, former deputy CIA director. "I'm glad I was born in 1922 instead of 1952. At least in my generation, we knew who the enemy was, and the enemy was monolithic."

But to listen to some at the meeting, which drew several hundred former intelligence officers, the real enemy remains in place: the news media, Congress, the publication of leaked information and the concept of the public's right to know.

"The people don't want to be informed," insisted former agency officer Ned Dolan, one of many lining up during a panel discussion to criticize the news media for intense coverage of intelligence activities.

Former CIA director Richard Helms

blamed leaks on the large staffs maintained by the Senate and House intelligence committees.

"There is the real question as to whether secrets can be kept in such circumstances or not," Helms told the group. "Maybe the Cold War has come to an end at about the right time because with so much congressional intrusion into the intelligence community's work, I'm not sure that we can really count on the kind of secrecy that one used to have."

For the past 17 years, the former intelligence officers' conventions have become a kind of annual reunion for former operatives of the CIA, the FBI, the National Security Agency and the military. The meetings are open and the group resembles any convention of retired business executives. There were no trench coats in

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evidence, for example, and the only cloaks and daggers appeared on business cards handed out by Dan D. Halpin, owner of Cloak and Dagger Books, a Bedford, N.H., firm that deals in volumes on espionage, codes and ciphers, assassinations and similar topics.

Besides the criticism of Congress and the news media, there were harsh comments about independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh, whose 4½-year criminal probe now is looking at alleged CIA coverups in the Iran-contra scandal.

People also talked wistfully about "Hal," meaning Harold P. Ford, the 70-year-old retired agency official who stunned the intelligence community early this month with his unexpectedly critical testimony about his friend Robert M. Gates's nomination to be CIA director. "We were sorrowful about

that," said Chuck Briggs, the association's president-elect. "But it was [a position Ford had] honestly come to."

The association was created in 1975 in what one organizational history calls "the darkest days of the profession"—when Congress held controversial hearings into alleged agency abuses. Now members of the group see themselves as a counterweight to critics of the intelligence community, and members regularly appear on college campuses and grant interviews to reporters trying to "educate" the public, as several put it.

"There is mistrust still out there," Rep. Porter J. Goss (R-Fla.), the only acknowledged former clandestine agency officer in Congress, told the group. "There always will be doubters and people to carry the message about doubt."