

Top CIA Proliferation Aide, Facing Budget Cuts, Quits

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The CIA's top official responsible for monitoring the spread of weapons of mass destruction has decided to retire after becoming convinced that his office's responsibilities are to be curtailed and his staff cut in a future CIA reorganization, according to intelligence officials.

Gordon Oehler, 55, who has occasionally embarrassed senior administration officials with his candid testimony about the involvement of foreign powers in arms proliferation, had staked his continued tenure at the CIA on gaining additional authority and personnel to collect intelligence, the officials said.

The congressional committees that oversee the CIA and several outside advisory groups, including one impaneled to give classified advice to President Clinton, had supported Oehler's request to expand the size and responsibility of the Nonproliferation Center.

The center tackles the task of detecting and halting the spread of missiles and chemical, biological and nuclear arms.

But the endorsements have collided with strenuous opposition inside the CIA from bureaucracies that would be forced to transfer funds and responsibilities to a more powerful center, including the Operations Directorate and Office of Scientific and Weapons Research, the officials said.

The fact that Oehler was unpopular with policy officials "because he sometimes delivers bad news . . . did not help him," said one former CIA official familiar with the turf battle.

Officials in other intelligence agencies likewise were uneasy at the prospect of Oehler becoming the proliferation czar.

Although CIA Director George J. Tenet has as yet made no formal decision, Tenet's top aides advised Oehler recently that the center's staff and size likely would be cut in the coming reorganization. As a result, Oehler, a physicist who has been at the agency for 25 years and directed the center since 1992, decided to leave by the end of this month, the officials said.

"I had a chance to think about this for a while," Oehler said yesterday in a telephone interview. After waiting more than a year for the center's future to be decided, leaving the agency has become "kind of a relief," he added.

Rep. Curt Weldon (R-Pa.), chairman of the House National Security subcommittee on military research and development, said he spoke to Oehler about his decision and that "he did not have plans to retire this early. He was building a center that was going to

become the point of contact for the administration and the Congress on all of the aspects of proliferation."

Weldon said he was concerned that Oehler's departure might lead to "the sanitization of what he was doing" and the dispersal of his responsibilities to uncoordinated fiefdoms within the CIA.

He said that many lawmakers had prized Oehler's testimony on sensitive matters relating to the transfer of weapons and related technology as "honest, candid and thorough"—a judgment echoed by several Senate aides who have heard him in classified sessions.

As the senior intelligence community spokesman on proliferation matters, Oehler made a number of assertions that discomfited the administration, including repeatedly telling Congress that China had provided M-11 missiles to Pakistan. The sale, if confirmed by policy officials, would require imposition of economic sanctions against China.

Most recently, according to several sources, Oehler had upset policymakers by candidly telling lawmakers in closed sessions about continuing Russian transfers of missile-related technology to Iran, forcing the administration to announce it is considering trade sanctions against Moscow.

But Oehler's center also attracted strong support from the president's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, which said in a classified study last summer that dangers associated with the potential spread of chemical and biological weapons warranted giving the center added powers to decide intelligence spending and to set priorities for collecting data.

The CIA has received similar advice in the past year from a panel of experts appointed by the agency's director and from members of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

"Since 1993, Congress has been adding to the powers of the [center] while, at the same time, CIA managers have reduced its authority, personnel, and budgets," the committee complained last year.

One intelligence official said yesterday that the difference of views about the center between those inside the CIA's headquarters and those outside is "startling."

The center, which has about 100 personnel, is responsible not only for collecting intelligence on arms-related transfers by developed countries, but also for reviewing certain U.S. export licenses for sensitive technology and coordinating U.S. aid to the United Nations inspections in Iraq.