Some Spying Secrets Will Stay out the Cold

By TIM WEINER

WASHINGTON

THREE years ago this week, Robert M. Gates, then Director of Central Intelligence, promised "a real shift on the C.I.A.'s part toward greater openness." He said the "continuing undifferentiated secrecy" would end, and that its old files on the great secret operations of the cold war would be made public.

Mr. Gates's promise remains unkept, and much evidence suggests that it will not soon come true.

In the classified archives of the C.I.A. lie millions of documents 30 years old and older. Under law, these papers should now be public. They detail the dozen years between the end of the Korean war in 1953 and the formal beginning of the Vietnam war in 1965, years in which the C.I.A.'s covert operators set out on a hundred different missions, like "an order of Knights Templar to save Western freedom from Communist darkness," in the words of William E. Colby, a former Director of Central Intelligence.

Some of the biggest operations are famous, though undocumented — the coup that installed the Shah of Iran in 1953, another that overthrew the President of Guatemala in 1954, a series of failed efforts to depose or murder Fidel Castro. Others

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operations remain obscure, such as aid to Tibetan rebels and covert assistance to conservative political leaders in Japan.

All these records remain sealed at the C.I.A.'s behest. But the agency's reach exceeds its own files. Last week, it blocked the release of White House and State Department papers documenting its secret support for Japanese conservatives.

The papers were to be published as part of the State Department's official history of American foreign policy, which has been printed in bound volumes since 1861 and is known as "The Foreign Relations of the United States." An advisory committee of historians overseeing the foreign relations series says the volume covering the Kennedy Administration's relations with Japan should not be published if the documents detailing the covert operation are withheld. To do otherwise, it said, would create a misleading and incomplete official record. Thus the C.I.A.'s action makes it likely that, for the first time in 134 years, a volume of the foreign relations series will contain a blank space where history should be.

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The strongest force for keeping the seal of secrecy is the agency's directorate of operations, the same people who ran the missions. Many of them believe that these documents remain explosive, despite the passage of time. They fear the disclosure of sources and methods and are unwilling to embarrass the still-living recipients of their largesse. Inertia at the agency's Center for the Study of Intelligence, which was created to review the old files, is another factor. Its process of historical review began 10 years ago as a way of keeping the same files forever from the grasp of historians and researchers using the Freedom of Information Act. The C.I.A. controls the documents and, thus, its own history.

Unshared Secrets

Despite Mr. Gates's warning that America's intelligence services "must change and be seen to change, or confront irrelevance and growing sentiment for their dismemberment," his openness campaign achieved little. His promise to publish the overall intelligence budget, some $28 billion a year, went unfulfilled. The agency is giving lie-detector tests to senior officials suspected of talking to the press. The problem of sharing secrets while preserving the agency's mystique appears to have proved unsolvable.

"They don't understand openness as anything other than a public relations problem," said Mel Goodman, a National War College professor who worked as an analyst of Soviet affairs for 20 years at the C.I.A. "The new director is going to have to come to terms with what openness means for a secret institution in a democratic society. It has to convince people that it is working in the best interests of the public. And to be convinced, we have to understand what the C.I.A. was doing in history."

In a few weeks, after nearly two years of bureaucratic dithering, President Clinton is supposed to issue an order automatically declassifying documents 25 years old and older by the end of the century. It will be fascinating to see how the C.I.A. copes. It has successfully defended its operational files for so long that historians compare its record of openness unfavorably to that of its old enemy, the K.G.B. And the C.I.A. knew the Soviet Union well enough to understand what happened when old truths were exhumed. The revival of history proved to be the death of the old regime.

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