

Joseph Kraft *post*
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Sorensen and Helms: 'Fall Guys'

When small boys learn there is no Santa they curse Christmas. So it is with the current temper tantrums over the Central Intelligence Agency.

The agency is a symbol of a national disillusionment. The small boys in public life are now taking out their disappointment on convenient fall guys—former director Richard Helms and Ted Sorensen, who has so nobly withdrawn his name from consideration as next director.

Americans have always harbored ambiguous attitudes toward secret intelligence. Committed to free institutions and believing this country to be especially moral, we have inevitably had hangups about reading other people's mail, not to mention subverting other people's governments.

During the early years of the cold war, the CIA seemed relatively exempt from the usual prejudices. It was a salient part of a national consensus, forged during World War II and continued without much change through the two decades thereafter. Moreover, almost everybody could see that the agency was doing useful work in the face of what was generally accepted to be a threat to the national security.

The agency gave advance warning of the Korean invasion. It surfaced Khrushchev's secret speech to the 24th Party Congress. It provided precise and timely information during the Cuban missiles crisis.

Apart from doing vital work, the agency offered something to the chief wings of national opinion. Conservatives, who consider themselves specially entrusted with national security, could feel that the agency was the acme of vigilant activism on the front lines. To their satisfaction, the CIA undid left wing regimes in Iran and Guatemala, and harassed left-wingers in Indonesia, Vietnam, Cuba and the Near East.

Liberals had the satisfaction of knowing that the analytic side of the agency was dominated by intellectuals in such centers as Cambridge and Berkeley. Compared to the other departments

and agencies fighting the cold war from Washington, the CIA was a paragon of subtle sophistication.

Vietnam and Watergate revealed a different side of the agency. It was seen to be not efficacious and skillful, but sleazy and bungling. It participated in assassination plots unworthy of this country. It spied on some Americans who had done nothing wrong and used others for "medical experiments." It lied to the Congress, played games with the White House, and was as much animated by bureaucratic rivalry as con-

cern for national security. Indeed, it used the "national security" cloak to cover its own mistakes.

The falling-off of the agency is part of a large historic process which dwarfs individuals. After the Cuba missile crisis, the basic cold war confrontation was transformed. Much of the agency did not make accommodation to the new conditions. Many intelligence officials, finding themselves with less and less serious business, began inventing missions and taking on tasks for which they were not fit.

But this large, impersonal explanation does not satisfy partisans with axes to grind. Liberals who are pleased to believe that America represents a sick, imperial culture, see the CIA as a prime carrier of the disease. They demand symbolic punishment, and are baying for indictment of former director Richard Helms on the ground that he committed perjury in the Watergate investigation.

Conservatives are pleased to believe that there is a failure of national nerve. They see the agency as the last-ditch trench in their battle to save the country from naive appeasement of Communist power.

So they opposed Jimmy Carter's nomination of Sorensen, a non-cold warrior, to be the next director. They did it by leak and innuendo and a mud-throwing campaign built on trivial incidents involving Sorensen's use of classified material for his book on Kennedy and the affidavit to that effect which he made available in the defense of Daniel Ellsberg, the purveyor of the Pentagon papers.

Both Sorensen and Helms are men I have known many years. I know as well as anybody they have shortcomings. I think Helms was wrong not to volunteer at some point what he knew — from the very first days—of the Nixon effort to cover up Watergate. I think Sorensen was wrong to mix his own use of documents, which was benign, with the Ellsberg case.

But both Helms and Sorensen are dedicated men of high intelligence and strong impulse to public service. They did what they thought was right given the accepted standards of the time. Roughing them up has been no service to the CIA or the country. On the contrary, the nobility of Sorensen's withdrawal stands as a powerful showing that the true cancer of the CIA lies in the corrupt, self-indulgent vanity of those who barred his way to an office he could have filled with distinction. This victory brings to mind Dr. Johnson's famous comment that patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels.

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