

Sorensen Was Just Right for the CIA

By ARTHUR SCHLESINGER JR.

Our new President delivered a very nice inaugural sermon, and we must all wish him well in the months ahead. He appears to have had a shorter honeymoon than most new Presidents, however, and was even in trouble with Congress before he took his oath of office, which seems hardly fair. One reason for this, I suppose, is that few members of Congress know him well. Another is that even fewer feel they owe their election to any efforts of his on their behalf. So legislators, including many in the President's own party, are in a wary and independent mood.

No doubt the success of the Senate in forcing the withdrawal of President Carter's nominee for CIA director will make Congress more assertive than ever. This was an extraordinary, perhaps unprecedented, humiliation to inflict on a newly elected President. Cabinet nominations have been rejected from time to time, but generally much later in a term; never, so far as I can recall, before a new President has actually been sworn in.

One wonders why Mr. Carter, with a 3-2 Democratic margin in the Senate, did not make a fight of it. Certainly his personal intervention could have changed enough Democratic votes on the committee to bring the nomination to the floor. But he evidently felt that he had only a limited amount of political capital for confirmation fights, and he obviously preferred to invest that in Griffin Bell.

Instead of seeing the Sorensen nomination as a test that would define his future relations with the Senate, Mr. Carter chose to cave in. He should not have nominated Mr. Sorensen unless he was prepared to fight for him. The Senate is now left with the impression that the new President is an easy man to scare. In time, I imagine, the legislators will be disabused. Meanwhile Mr. Carter has created some unnecessary problems for himself.

The reasons alleged against Mr. Sorensen were patently spurious. The senatorial expressions of horror over the use of classified documents in a serious historical work come implausibly from a body so given to bouts of oratory about the sins of overclassification and the importance of the people's right to know. As one who had the same unspeakable traffic with classified documents in my own memoir of the Kennedy administration, I must declare an interest. But everyone in Washington knows there is nothing sacred about SECRET stamps. Investigation after investigation has shown the abuse of classification by government agencies. Congress has wailed for years about its need to have the information necessary for informed judgment on questions of foreign policy.

Classified Documents

The fact is that Mr. Sorensen used his classified documents with the utmost circumspection. No one has ever charged a breach of security against his excellent "Kennedy" (or against "A Thousand Days," for that matter). All the episode shows is that Mr. Sorensen has the capacity to distinguish between secrets that ought to be kept and information that ought to be disclosed. This is exactly what one would want, I would think, as head of CIA.

moralist, as if that were a grievous fault. I can only say that no one who worked with Ted Sorensen in the White House thought of him particularly as a moralist. He is a sharp, clear-headed, incisive and entirely practical man who would have been, I am confident, a first-class head of CIA.

The agency would not have tried to slip things by him, as the FBI has so often slipped things by the hapless Clarence Kelley; or at least it would not have tried twice. He would have cast a cold eye on CIA projects and would have had to be shown. From what we know of CIA aspira-

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tions, that would have been a healthy thing for the agency. But he would also have been an excellent judge of what CIA could profitably do and a most persuasive advocate of the agency's interest within the government and before Congress.

If only Mr. Sorensen, instead of writing an invaluable work in contemporary American history, had spent his time planning napalm attacks against Vietnamese peasants, the Senators would doubtless have confirmed him by acclamation. But what they evidently feared, underneath the nonsense about his book, was that he might really do what they have long pretended they wanted done—reform the intelligence community.

It has been speculated that the overthrow of Mr. Sorensen was one of the few recent CIA successes in the field of covert action. If my information is correct, the opposition came much more from the Defense Department than from the CIA. General Daniel Graham, recently retired from the Defense Intelligence Agency, was reported in the corridors of the Senate whispering baleful thoughts to key legislators.

The hot argument in the intelligence community these days is over the estimates of Soviet military strength and intentions. Defense has traditionally sounded fearful alarms, especially around budget time. The notorious "missile gap," about which the Air Force shouted so much in 1959-61, is typical. The CIA, then and now, has taken a more sober view and, as in the case of the missile gap, has generally turned out to be right in the end.

History provides no reason to think that soldiers are more reliable on these matters than civilians. Rather the contrary: as Lord Salisbury, the British Foreign Secretary, reproached the Viceroy of India a century ago: "You listen too much to the soldiers. No lesson seems to be so deeply inculcated by the experience of life as that you never should trust in experts. If you believe the doctors nothing is wholesome; if you believe the theologians nothing is innocent if you believe the soldiers nothing is safe. They all require to have their

strong wine diluted by a very large admixture of insipid common sense."

The CIA recently took a rather non-alarmist view of the Soviet military posture. Then the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board proposed that the CIA's raw evidence be turned over to an outside group. The generally sensible George Bush, the retiring CIA director, was gulled into accepting the idea that the outside group be made up of men, otherwise estimable, who were committed hard-liners. It was rather like dispatching Typhoid Mary to stop a typhoid epidemic. Naturally the outsiders found in the evidence just what they wanted to find. Their review came down heavily on the side of the Defense Department.

Sorensen's Concern

This is no doubt why the Defense Department was so concerned about the possible appointment of Mr. Sorensen as head of CIA. For Mr. Sorensen would presumably have backed his own analysts and would have been able to argue their case with incomparable skill in the councils of the administration. It was this concern, it would appear, that accounted fundamentally for his downfall.

All this leaves the Senate Committee on Intelligence Activities in dubious light. Ever since Watergate, the Senate has been proclaiming its steely and unflinching determination to deal with the intelligence community. Faced with the opportunity of appointing a man who might do exactly that, the Senators panicked. Does the Sorensen episode indicate what Senate oversight of the intelligence community will amount to? Is this a watchdog committee? It seems to be the sort of watchdog that nuzzles up to the burglar in the night and licks his hand. As George McGovern said in an eloquent intervention, its performance really was a shameful moment in the recent history of the Senate.

President Carter now faces the question of a new CIA appointment. The same pressures that defeated the Sorensen nomination are doubtless arguing for an intelligence professional, if not for someone positively acceptable to the Pentagon. I trust the President does not go down this road.

Intelligence is not like nuclear physics. It is not so arcane a business that only a professional can master it. And the professionals, who have lived so long in an isolated and hallucinatory world, tend to lose any sense of accountability to Congress and the people. There was much criticism of George Bush's appointment on the ground that he was a politician. I argued at the time—and I think events have vindicated the argument—that that is precisely what was required. Given our recent experience with intelligence agencies, those agencies surely need most of all leadership schooled in the principles and procedures of accountability to the democratic process. President Carter's next choice for the CIA will be an interesting test of his own sense of these problems.

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