

Stephen S. Rosenfeld

Learning on Intelligence

The quarrel that William J. Casey and his fellow speculators had over an investment turkey in the 1970s is piquant, and the play in the Senate Intelligence Committee about his tenure as CIA director is instructive. But what I have wanted to know is whether this erstwhile World War II spy runner, lawyer, diplomat, banker and Reagan campaign director—okay, whether this Wall Street hustler—could provide good intelligence.

Start at Team B, then-CIA director George Bush's mid-'70s panel of outside experts set up to critique the CIA-led intelligence community's analysts on the Soviet threat. The argument then was whether Team B was a healthy "competitive review" of a shop that had gone ivory-tower soft, or whether its hard-line membership and assumed political mandate made it a "kangaroo court."

Intellectually, that argument was not resolved. Politically, it was. Team B won. That is, trends in the real world and the emerging political consensus, in some combination, made their inevitable mark

on the intelligence bureaucrats, and the darker, more hawkish and more pessimistic estimates prevailed. This happened during the Carter period.

So it was that when Casey arrived at the CIA and checked out the estimating process, he found it sound, needing attention to performance but not design. You can read this several ways. It could be evidence that the process has indeed achieved the goal, so venerated by analysts, of turning out a politics-proof product. Or it could mean that Casey, inheriting a full set of political biases, didn't think or care to examine them.

In any event, confidence in the product brims at Langley. So does confidence in a process based on a notion of multiple competing centers of analysis, those centers being inside the separate government departments and outside in the academic, business and scientific communities. Such competition is traditional, but it is now being tended with a certainty that it is an improvement on the old style.

It is not just the Team B episode that underlies the current insistence that pursuit of diversity has been institutionalized. Albert Wohlstetter's earlier charge that the intelligence community had "systematically" underestimated Soviet missile deployment is taken as the guiding gospel. Israel's pre-1973 organizing of its intelligence services on centralized rather than competitive lines is taken as a real-life object lesson.

Casey has kept (departmental) dissents in the texts of estimates. Oddly, in one estimate his was recorded as the sole dissent. He has thrown back a number of estimates, on the stated grounds that they fell short intellectually, did not address the right question or did not include (or explain the absence of) key evidence. The "right question"? The other day, *The New York Times* reported, Casey said he had rejected estimates on Africa and Latin America that had "not addressed Soviet interests, activities and influence."

The one Casey-era CIA document I have seen is a "research paper," "Patterns of International Terrorism: 1980," published in June. Press reports have said Casey ordered it to blame the Soviet Union; it does—as a victim of terrorism as well as a party "deeply engaged in support of revolutionary violence." Again oddly, Casey is now held to feel that the paper was published to satisfy a State Department wish to get the numbers out and that the analysts in it was not good enough. On the latter point, surely he's right.

It is worth noting that the people running the analysis side enjoy wide respect, not least from some of those who regard Casey as a buccaneer. One of these is his deputy, Adm. Bobby Ray Inman, who has won high and usually unpatronizing civilian regard for his seriousness and competence. Another is the new chief of estimates, former Whiz Kid, RAND president and professor Henry S. Rowen, a quality defense intellectual.

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It is also worth noting that among the CIA's congressional overseers there is no visible inclination to question the Casey analytical approach. Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.) says approvingly that Casey is bringing a "new vigor" and "a different point of view," and Sen. Daniel P. Moynihan (D-N.Y.) feels that "there is no reason to think Casey is going in the wrong direction."

I feel on shaky ground in saying this, but I am not entirely reassured. I suspect that Casey has reinforced the premises he found when he arrived and that the agency is looking at the world through red-colored glasses. Intelligence cannot be politics-free. It should not be. But is there now the proper tension between politicians with their inevitable demand for crisp answers and (good) analysts with their natural drive for clear questions? I am not suggesting that intelligence is being politically cooked but that it is being politically leaned on. Where is Team B?