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The CIA's Unrepentant Side

Robert M. Gates has promised that things are going to be different at the CIA—no more lying to Congress, no more cooking of reports or suppression of dissent. What is he going to do about the condescension?

The official motto of the agency is "Seek Ye the Truth." The real one, however, is "None of Your Business."

Acting Director Richard Kerr—gray hair, gray suit, patronizing manner—went before the Senate subcommittee on terrorism, narcotics and international operations the other day and the "old" CIA was in full view.

He was not amused by Chairman John F. Kerry's presumption that the CIA should explain what it was doing with BCCI, the big bad bank accused of duping public officials and laundering drug money. Charges that it had failed to blow the whistle were, he said, "outrageous and unfounded."

Why, said Kerr huffily, the agency had written hundreds of reports—and disseminated them all around the government except to the one agency that could have done something about it—the Federal Reserve.

"Even in hindsight," he said, Treasury, Justice and other law enforcement agencies were the appropriate customers for the agency's reports. Snidely, he went on, "If I had addressed the Federal Reserve, that probably would have been useful for this hearing."

Kerry (D-Mass.) asked politely if the committee might see the reports.

Kerr was reflexively not at all sure. "Our problem with disseminating individual reports is one very close to sources and methods." He would, however, be "glad to pursue it."

"Is this going to be one of those long pursuits?" asked Kerry.

"Well," said Kerr, "I would like to look carefully at what we are talking about and talk to our oversight committee . . ."

That last was a little reminder that the man monitoring the spooks is doting David L. Boren (D-Okla.), who is infatuated with the agency, and is leading the charge in the Senate for Gates's confirmation.

Kerry gently pointed out that other departments had seen the information. "If they can get it, the U.S. Senate ought to get it, is that fair?" Kerry's good manners briefly discountenanced Kerr, who agreed it was fair.

The exchange illustrated the difficulty of reconciling a secret intelligence agency with democratic

openness. The Senate should, of course, be debating the excellent suggestion of Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) that with the end of the Cold War, the CIA should be shut down and its activities taken over by the State Department. But conservatives can't very well push other favorite follies like space stations and "Star Wars" if they turn the CIA into a homeless shelter, and make it official that Moscow is a basket case.

Sen. Hank Brown (R-Colo.) attempted to persuade Kerr that the spook who chose not to alert the Fed should be called on the carpet.

"My training is, someone is supposed to take responsibility," said Brown. Kerr did not even attempt to conceal his contempt. He had no intention of punishing the individual who had made "an honest mistake"—a mistake that caused a tidal wave in banking circles and endangered the life savings of thousands of small depositors.

"I am not sure it was a bad decision," he said, unrepentantly, exhibiting an unfamiliarity with the repentance curve so effectively ridden by Gates in his confirmation hearings before the Senate intelligence committee.

Contrition is all the rage now. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) was driven to it and Sen. Alan K. Simpson (R-Wyo.), too. The Senate loves to see heavy traffic on the sawdust trail.

The real rap against Gates is that he was not a good citizen in the Iran-contra affair. He wasn't even mildly curious about the bad things coming down in his own government. His career, the agency, came before the country. He knew what was up earlier than he ever admitted to Congress and did nothing about it, just as Kerr knew that BCCI was a rogue bank and felt no obligation to go the extra mile.

The CIA is a law unto itself, with a culture, a mystique that is probably in the walls over there, like the condescension. But Gates's minimalist concession that he should have asked more questions cinched his confirmation. Kerr treated the senators with an arrogance that doubtless guaranteed him a hero's welcome back in Langley.

The acting director was disdainful of their questions. "I am not sure what the point of that question is," he would sniff, or, "I am not sure how relevant this is to this issue."

The real problem is that the CIA does not think there's any point or relevance to Congress, and Congress's reaction is to lick its boots.