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Boos on Hiss

When it comes to what Anthony Lake really thinks about Alger Hiss, President Clinton's assistants roll their eyes, but not Republican senators. They see his stated ambivalence about that long-ago spy case as underpinning their suspicions that Lake is the wrong man for CIA director.

Asked on NBC's "Meet the Press" Nov. 24 whether he thought Alger Hiss (who died Nov. 15) was a Soviet spy in the 1940s, Lake responded: "I've read a couple of books that certainly offered a lot of evidence that he may have been. I don't think it's conclusive." U.S. senators who think the evidence is quite conclusive regard Lake's answer as pertinent to the coming confirmation process.

They include Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, who in general believes a president is entitled to the appointees he wants but privately describes Lake's views as "peculiar." They certainly include the new Senate Intelligence Committee chairman, Sen. Richard Shelby of Alabama. During Lake's "courtesy call" in Shelby's office Thursday, the senator made clear that he takes the Hiss comments most seriously.

For Lake, time spent with Shelby seemed less like courtesy than like 20 minutes in the dentist's chair. Apart from Hiss, the chairman questioned whether former National Security Adviser Lake at the CIA can be independent of the Clinton administration, assailed his secret approval of Iranian arms for Bosnian Muslims and wondered aloud whether his policies at the White House have been shaped by foreign contributors.

Lake was perhaps least prepared to be challenged on the Hiss case. The attitude at the White House was reflected in mid-December when columnist James Pinkerton asked spokesman David Johnson about Lake's comments on "Meet the Press." "This is not exactly a high item on the agenda of most people," said Johnson.

Shelby told Lake his inability to come to a conclusion about Hiss had to be put in context with a CIA embarrassed by the alleged Russian espionage of Harold Nicholson. However, the problem goes deeper.

Lake's appropriateness for the job

was disputed by three CIA "old boys" who keep a close watch on the agency and view its problems with bipartisan detachment. "It's a terrible appointment," one high-ranking former official said. He cited Lake's lack of managerial experience and his introspective, professorial personality but most of all what he considers the Clinton aide's anti-intelligence bias. That bias is seen by him in Lake's questioning whether Alger Hiss was a spy.

When Lake is interrogated under oath by Shelby before the Intelligence Committee some months hence, he may have to say what many people in the Washington establishment find difficult to concede: Yes, Alger Hiss was a spy, a liar and a traitor.

Then why not say it to Tim Russert on "Meet the Press"? The White House explanation that Lake was leery about speaking ill of Hiss on the day that he died is disingenuous, considering the fact that his death was 10 days earlier. Lake would be well advised to come up with a better answer when he testifies.

He also will have to craft a clever response to another question propounded by Shelby: "Can you be independent of the Clinton administration?" Lake said yes, but the senator was unconvinced. Actually, the last CIA director who could be said to be truly independent of the administration may have been Allen Dulles, who nearly four decades ago served under both Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy.

The problem is that the director of Central Intelligence has three functions: intelligence adviser to the president, leader of the U.S. intelligence community and manager of the CIA. How can an adviser be independent of the administration? Ted Shackley, a former CIA official, has suggested in books and articles that these jobs should be separated.

But that is not Tony Lake's real problem. Twenty years ago, former JFK aide Ted Sorensen failed to win confirmation as President Jimmy Carter's CIA chief because of his perceived hostility to gathering intelligence. Nobody predicts things will go that far with Lake. Then again, nobody thought so in 1977 at this stage of Sorensen's confirmation ordeal.

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