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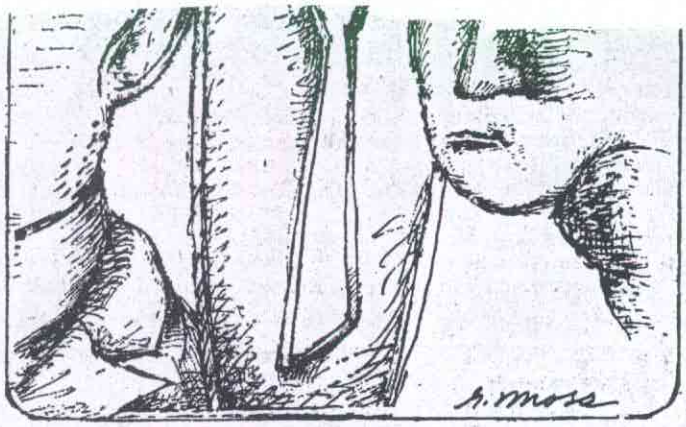
A 'Super CIA'?



By Geoffrey Moss for The Washington Post

A Washington Post editorial of June 30 on "The Intelligence Iceberg" raises some important questions. "The real issue," according to The Post, "is whether, for the first time since the intelligence community was organized in 1947, the President will actually control the whole of it." The truth is that, in law (the National Security Act of 1947) and in fact, the President has always had complete control of the intelligence community to the full extent that he cared to exercise it, subject only to congressional control of all funds for intelligence activities and certain legislative prohibitions, such as the provision in the 1947 Act that the CIA shall have no police powers.

The Post calls for centralization of the intelligence community into a single government-wide establishment—a sort of super CIA. It warns that "without centralization, the President will be poorly placed to prevent gross abuses of the sort whose disclosure led to the current review." This overlooks the fact that, as both the Church and Pike congressional committees have pointed out, these "gross abuses" were the direct result of operations carried out at White House direction. In the words of the Pike report, ". . . the CIA, far from being out of control, has been highly responsive to the instructions of the President. . . ."

One can only guess at the mischief that might have resulted had Richard Nixon had at his disposal during the Watergate coverup a government-wide intelligence apparatus centralized under his hand-picked director. (It is worth recalling in this connection that the first senior offical to refuse to play the White House game at the time of Watergate was CIA Director Richard Helms, who ordered the termination of any CIA assistance to Howard Hunt and refused to permit the protection of alleged CIA operations in Mexico to be used as a coverup device for the plumbers.)

The Post goes on to argue that "somebody ought to be conveying to the government's intelligence chief (in this case the Director of Central Intelligence) the questions on the mind of the chief civilian policymaker," i.e., the President. But if the President isn't communicating with his hand-picked intelligence chief—Adm. Stansfield Turner—it's hard to see how reorganizing the intelligence community would solve the problem. In fact, unlike his predecessors, Turner spends much of his time in the Executive Office Building next to the White House, and reportedly is a regular participant in discussions of foreign-policy and national-security issues.

Taking Exception

Besides the director's involvement on the highest levels, there are well over a dozen interdepartmental working-level committees to ensure full exchange and cooperation between various agencies with intelligence interests—CIA, State, Defense, Treasury, FBI, etc.—and to make certain that they all march to the same drummer.

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Centralization would seriously complicate the management of military resources—aircraft, missile launchers, submarines—essential to support various vital technical collection systems. They now fall into the military chain of command, from which the Director of Central Intelligence is excluded by law. Should he have air, missile-launching and submarine assets of his own?

Current discussion of intelligence organization has apparently assumed "normal" conditions. If major national intelligence assets are concentrated in a civilian agency, how are they suddenly to become fully responsive to the military, upon whom the major burden of executing national policy may fall in time of crisis or conflict?

A wise veteran of White House councils once observed that the greatest threat to peace in our time may be an ill-informed President. Should we deny the President the flexible and resourceful intelligence support he will need in meeting the challenges that confront him by encasing our intelligence machinery in a legislative straightjacket? And is this the time to impair the President's use of covert political or paramilitary action that might avoid the necessity for armed intervention where our vital interests are in jeopardy?

Finally, if this antiquated intelligence hand has learned anything during 35 years in the business (27 in CIA and seven in Defense), it is the importance of duplication, diversity and debate. Duplication and diversity because every intelligence source, whether human or technical, is not only highly perishable, but also subject to hostile manipulation as a deception channel. The only protection from such hazards is variety and redundance of sources.

Even more important is free and lively debate among the analysts and estimators. Never has a nation been so rich in the quantity and quality of its raw intelligence as we are today. The challenge is in drawing meaningful conclusions from such a mass of data. This is doubly difficult not only because the evidence on major issues is often conflicting, but also because the parochial interests or political or philosophical perceptions of government institutions and individuals vary widely. No President can afford confidence in his intelligence estimates unless they have stood the test of scrutiny and debate among those with differing judgments, responsibilities and institutional affiliations.

In sum, the intelligence community has arrived at its present state as a result of 30 years of trial and error, innumerable hearings, investigations, recommendations, reorganizations and—most important—the practical experiences of a large body of trained and dedicated professionals, both military and civilian. If further adjustments are necessary, they can readily be accomplished, as in the past, by executive order.