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CONTROVERSIAL

Mediators Stilling U.S. Flash Points

By JEFF PRUGH
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ATLANTA—They are usually anonymous faces in the crowd, with tiny buttons in their ears and walkie-talkies under their jackets.

They keep low profiles when tensions are high, when Ku Klux Klansmen and black activists are sniping at each other in the Deep South, or neo-Nazis threaten to goose-step through a Jewish suburb of Chicago, or Mexican-Americans angrily allege police brutality in the barrios of Houston.

Their job is to try to bring emotions in line with reason. It calls for friendly persuasion, a cool head and a firm finger on a community's social and political pulse—when other fingers may be on the triggers of handguns and rifles.

"We go into places where bullets are flying, with nothing more than a white flag on the aerial of a car," Gilbert G. Pompa, director of the Justice Department's Community Relations Service, said in an interview in Washington. "Our most effective weapon is our ability to persuade."

It is not by accident that relatively little is known about the CRS, beyond its mandate—under the Civil Rights Act of 1964—to mediate and conciliate in racial and ethnic conflicts.

Its predominantly black and Hispanic staff of 111 strives for low visibility and high confidentiality. The reason is to avoid betraying a trust on either side of the 3,258 disputes—many embracing police-minority friction, school busing and Indian territorial claims—in which the agency has involved itself in the last four years alone.

"Otherwise," a CRS spokesman said, "you'd stand a chance of alienating the very people we're trying to help."

But even as the CRS intervenes in controversy, it has become controversial itself. The act of swapping confidences and keeping secrets has left the agency open to suspicion and criticism over what its role really is.

It gets mixed reviews—ranging from praise by some civil rights, civic and school officials, to a 1974 lawsuit in Mississippi accusing it of inflaming the very dispute it was supposed to resolve. Attacks have come from both the far left and far right of the political spectrum—from groups as diverse as the Concerned Citizens Against the Klan and the KKK itself.

Moreover, its credibility, in the eyes of some critics, has been tainted in recent years by revelations that former Atty. Gen. Ramsey Clark approved of a plan in 1967 by then Assistant Atty. Gen. John Doar to in-

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incorporate the CRS into a network of federal agencies that would spy on militant black, anti-war and radical protest groups. Foremost among these critics was the Senate Intelligence Committee, headed by Sen. Frank Church (D-Ida.), which accused the intelligence-gathering network of "excessive collection of information about law-abiding citizens."

Pompa and other CRS officials insist that the CRS never has engaged in spying. They scoff at critics who have accused the agency of being a "black FBI" or a "domestic CIA."

"If I was to find out for a fact that the agency was involved in intelligence gathering, I would be one disappointed individual," said Pompa, who joined the CRS in 1967 and was appointed director last year by President Carter. "I would not support the continuation of this agency. And I'll say this before God and the world."

His predecessor as director, Ben Holman, who is now a journalism and broadcast professor at the University of Maryland, shares the conviction. "It was almost like McCarthyism in reverse when somebody challenged me about it in a debate in San Francisco," Holman recalled. "It's a constant suspicion that never dies. When somebody asks me, 'what about your intelligence operation?' I say, 'It's just not true.'"

But the intelligence unit was under the "supervision" of a four-man committee including the CRS director (starting with Roger W. Wilkins in 1967 and Holman, who succeeded Wilkins in 1969) and the assistant attorneys general in charge of the Justice Department's civil rights, criminal and internal security divisions, according to a 1976 report by the Senate Intelligence Committee headed by Sen. Church.

The report added that the CRS director, starting in 1970, also was part of the government's Intelligence Evaluation Committee, which included officials of Army intelligence and the FBI. Both committees were described in the Church committee report as the attorney general's "main source" of data on civil disorders.

Wilkins could not be reached for comment, but Holman said that in his own role on the committees he drew a fine line between "gathering" intelligence and "evaluating" it.

"The only information reviewed was from the FBI," Holman said, "and in one case I can recall stating very strongly that I didn't believe the FBI when it said that the black community in New Haven (Conn.) was upset over a forthcoming Black Panther trial there and that there might be civil disorder. . . . That doesn't make me, or the CRS, an intelligence gatherer. Never in the eight years that I was director did any CRS reports go beyond me."

Mediators Quiet Flash Points in U.S.

In many instances the CRS has clearly been a trouble-shooter, not a troublemaker. Its soft-talking and hard-bargaining works, even if it means staying up late at night behind the scenes to help both sides settle their differences, as CRS agents did recently in an Atlanta police-hiring discrimination case. It has been estimated that the agency's help in this case saved \$1 million in additional court costs.

The CRS has had a front-row seat at some cataclysmic moments of recent American history: the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery voting rights march in Alabama, the 1973 occupation by militant Indians at Wounded Knee, S.D., and the 1968 Memphis garbage workers' strike, during which Martin Luther King was assassinated. (Two CRS agents were in a motel room next door to King's when the civil rights leader was slain on the balcony outside his room.)

Even if CRS officials fail to turn hostility to tranquility, they often are credited with helping to keep the cauldron from boiling over.

"As far as I know, they've been helpful—they do more good than harm," said the Rev. Joseph E. Lowery, president of the Atlanta-based Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which led about 1,500

marchers through Decatur last summer in a peaceful protest of the rape conviction of Tommy Lee Hines, a mentally retarded black.

"The impression they've given me," Lowery added, "is that they try to help local governments understand what civil rights groups are trying to achieve and to keep them from overreacting."

In Lansing, Mich., a federal judge ordered CRS agents to help resolve a school-desegregation squabble in 1976. The school superintendent at the time was favorably impressed. "They knew where the hot spots were," said I. Carl Candoli, who now is a professor of education administration at the University of Kansas. "They provided bilingual help—one was a relative of somebody in our Mexican-American community—and they were not threatening in any way to either side."

On President Carter's home turf, in southwestern Georgia's Sumter County, CRS officials intervened in a recent public school boycott by about 70% of the system's pupils and parents, who were protesting what they called inferior classroom conditions. The matter is before the courts.

"They did not succeed in defusing the controversy," Ron Foust, a protest leader, said of the CRS actions, "but they talked to both parties and served a purpose of trying to forestall the tremendous expense of loading down the court."

Increasingly, however, the agency has made enemies while trying to win friends.

Social activists have protested that CRS operatives showed government intelligence files on radical-left mourners to black ministers as a way of trying to dissuade blacks from joining a Greensboro, N.C., funeral march for five Communist Workers Party members to were slain there in November.

The charges were denied by Ozell Sutton, Southeastern regional director of the CRS. "We have no files on anybody," he said. "We have no intelligence capability."

In 1978, a black CRS mediator, Freddie Crawford, surprised onlookers, including reporters, when he punched a white man who had uttered a racial slur in the Tupelo, Miss., police station. (Crawford was not charged; the white man was.)

In 1974, a predominantly black civil rights group, the United League of Mississippi, accused the CRS in a federal lawsuit of paying derelicts to disrupt strategy meetings for a boycott against white merchants in Byhalia, Miss. The CRS denied the charges and the suit eventually was dropped, but United League president Alfred (Skip) Robinson, 44, a black contractor, still feels that the litigation was proper.

"They monitor people, and the information goes to the FBI," Robinson said in an interview. "They keep files on people who are out there struggling. I really think that our taxpayers' money could be better spent."

Ironically, Robinson's hostility toward the CRS is shared—for different reasons—by an avowed racist, Bill Wilkinson, imperial wizard of the Invisible Empire Knights of the KKK. His group held demonstrations to counter those of Robinson's group in Tupelo, Miss.

"They're the most do-nothing, free-loading agency the government's got," Wilkinson said. "I'm not talking to them anymore. The niggers won't talk to them either."

The CRS was originally formed, in 1964, to monitor compliance with the Civil Rights Act in public accommodations across the South that had been segregated. The agency was first part of the Commerce Department.

Its parameters were delineated thus in a portion of the Civil Rights Act: "No officer or employee of the (Community Relations) Service shall engage in the performance of investigative or prosecuting functions of any department or agency in any litigation arising out of a dispute in which he acted on behalf of the Service."

In 1966, the agency was moved to the Justice Department when President Lyndon B. Johnson reorganized the government. Its activities were expanded to what CRS officials call "preventive maintenance," rather than just "crisis response."

Along the way, as racial turbulence and anti-war riots erupted across America, the Justice Department envisioned yet a wider role for the CRS. In 1967, Doar proposed to Clark that the CRS be part of an intelligence group called the IDIU (Inter-Divisional Information Unit), which, he said, would "analyze the FBI information we receive about certain persons and groups who make the urban ghetto their base of operation."

Doar recognized, however, that using the CRS for such purposes was sensitive. "A special problem exists with the Community Relations Service," he wrote in a memorandum to Clark. "Generally, the service feels that if it passes on information it learns in the course of its business about activities in the urban areas that it will lose its credibility with people in the ghetto."



Gilbert G. Pompa

"My personal view is that the service is in the Department of Justice and should bring to the department's attention any information which you request it to furnish. I would think that the department itself could develop standards and safeguards so that the confidentiality of the information . . . is maintained."

(The Doar plan is contained in a document that was declassified by the Justice Department as a result of a Freedom of Information Act request by Ken Lawrence, director of the Anti-Represion Resource Team, which is based in Jackson, Miss.)

Five weeks later, Clark approved the project, advising in an internal Justice Department memo that "planning and creation of the unit must be kept in strictest confidence."

Clark contended in 1978 that he was right. "After the riots at Newark and Detroit in the summer of 1967, the country was awash with fear and racial hatred," he wrote to the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker-affiliated group that has crusaded against domestic government spying. ". . . If (the unit) was an effort to know all we know; that is, to centralize and organize information we possessed so we could quickly gather all knowledge bearing on the risk of riot. . .

"We never authorized any illegal fact gathering. No wiretap or bugging was ever authorized against any domestic group or individual. . . ." (CRS officials today say they have no record that their agency ever was part of the intelligence unit.)

The CRS grew to 361 employees in 1969, but was trimmed by two-thirds later in the Administration of President Richard M. Nixon after many of its functions were said to overlap with other government departments. It now has an annual budget of \$5.1 million.

A year ago, the Carter Administration proposed eliminating the CRS as a way of reducing the federal budget. But some black leaders rallied to its rescue, and Griffin B. Bell, then attorney general, con-

vinced the Administration that the agency remained necessary.

Today, the CRS has regional offices in 10 U.S. cities: Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Kansas City, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Seattle. It coordinates all activities from a 6th-floor suite of offices on 11th Street in downtown Washington.

There, teletypes clatter and an enormous wall map of the United States is dotted with flickering lights that identify cities and towns where the CRS is trying to resolve disputes. The busiest category (with 80 active cases at the moment) involves friction between police and minority groups. The CRS regularly conducts seminars for policemen on the use of force.

Other problem areas are the KKK resurgence (the agency answered 44 complaints regarding the klan last year, compared to only 8 the year before), Indian territorial rights, school desegregation and Indochinese refugee resettlement in such places as California's Orange County and Seadrift, Tex.

In Seadrift, where violence erupted last year between Vietnamese and native Texans over offshore fishing rights, CRS officials said that they have tried to counteract what they called false rumors of government benefits to the refugees. "We heard wild tales of Vietnamese getting \$5,000 and a new car and loans to buy a \$50,000 boat," said Wallace Warfield, the CRS field operations coordinator. "We went to the local newspaper and encouraged it to publish correct information about what the Vietnamese were getting. Just finding more information about each other helped bring some calm to the situation."

In addition, the CRS is mediating a quarrel between Louisville city officials and black police officers who have alleged racial discrimination in promotions and disciplinary action. It also sent representatives to the New Mexico state prison recently in the wake of bloody rioting that killed 33 inmates.

Now, at the dawn of the 1980s, at least one CRS executive sees a stormy road ahead for his agency.

Ozell Sutton, a black sharecropper's son who spent his boyhood on an Arkansas plantation, warned other blacks at a YMCA luncheon in Atlanta recently that the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan is "not to be taken lightly."

"Blacks are no longer afraid of the KKK," he said. "Although it is highly desirable, they cannot be expected to be nonviolent in the traditions of Dr. King when provoked and confronted by the klan."