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The CIA Puzzle

In five weeks of travel abroad, almost every newspaper I encountered has played up the misdeeds, real or imagined, of the CIA. For one American this has been embarrassing and particularly when even polite foreigners get around to asking why. After all, the implication is, the institution must have served a useful purpose, since Congress had provided it with large funds and secret responsibilities for 30 years.

At times it has had the color of the fantastic, not to mention the ludicrous. Poison cigars, poison rings—it might have come out of a Boys World edited by a junior Dracula. In the media game as it hits the CIA any number can play and the bigger the odds against fact, or the relationship between truth and reality, the blacker the headline.

The CIA has performed over the years an important intelligence gathering function. It has provided the raw material for intelligence judgments repeatedly closer to objectivity than the intelligence findings of the military—which tend to tip the scales in favor of more and more military hardware.

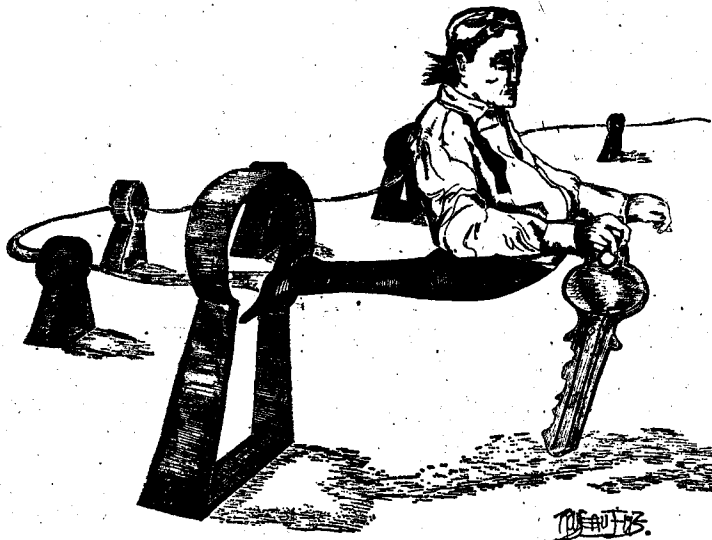
The danger, it seems to me, is that this valuable function may be lost in purging the follies that have grown like weeds in the vast compost heap of an agency that may well be beyond the grasp of any director. Able intelligence officers around the world are discouraged and depressed by what they fear is an end to their usefulness.

Take one such agent who must, for obvious reasons, be anonymous but for whose integrity I can vouch. John Jones is serving in a post not so dangerous as, say, Beirut but with plenty of hazards in the turmoil of the Middle East.

With a knowledge of Russian and three other languages, Jones has served in four previous posts during his 28 years with the agency. While he is properly restrained about his work, I would guess that it is chiefly concerned with Soviet activities both within the country and on the borders. The relationship between subversive foreign agents and terror would be part of his concern.

Since he began at a young age, Jones has still 15 years or more to go before compulsory retirement at 65. In light of his experience and his proven ability these should be his most useful years.

But he is seriously thinking of returning to Washington to resign. To my knowledge this is far from an iso-



By Jean-Francois Rousseau for The Washington Post

lated instance. Losing the ablest men with long experience will seriously cripple the agency.

What is the future of the CIA? Some opponents have said it should be abolished entirely. President Ford, in a recent interview, expressed his belief that the borderline of serious, crippling damage to the intelligence community has been reached. He is acting responsibly, he believes, in passing on all relevant information to the Senate committee investigating the CIA, and beyond that there is not much he can do inasmuch as Congress is an independent body.

Committee Chairman Frank Church has shown every evidence of wanting to conduct a responsible inquiry rather than a television spectacular. This will be difficult, given the pressures for leaks and counter-leaks.

A final resolution is a long way off. One answer might be to separate intelligence gathering and analysis functions from the dirty tricks department. Given the idiocies of the poison cigar and the red wig and false nose activities of such as E. Howard Hunt, there

should be serious consideration as to the scope and the latitude of that department.

Those defending the need of the agency in both functions cite the estimated 400,000 agents of the Soviet's spy apparatus, the KGB, as against the 30,000 or so in the CIA. This is, of course, irrelevant. A secret apparatus operating in an open society might have expected the barrage that has hit the CIA. It is surprising only that it did not come sooner.

You can hardly imagine a front page story in Pravda exposing a luckless KGB agent who flubbed an attempt to pass a poison cigar to Sen. Strom Thurmond in the Senate dining room. Except for a rare defector, the worldwide operations of the KGB are shrouded in deepest secrecy. This advantage is offset at least in part by the KGB's heavy handed methods.

No matter what name it goes by, spying is a dirty business, and the chief spy can hardly qualify as a Boy Scout leader. This is the reality of American power in a divided world.