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CIA Has an Image to Lose

A fitting symbol for the beleaguered Central Intelligence Agency may be found in the unheralded statue of Nathan Hale, which sits inside the security gates of the agency's headquarters building in Langley.

No one at the CIA will suggest to the agency's new director, John M. Deutch, that he pose for a photo next to the larger-than-life Hale statue as he begins his first week at headquarters. That's because the spies know the true story of Hale, a man whose "one life to lose" for his country was a wasted life.

In the CIA Historical Library are documents that prove Hale was a glory-seeker whose famous espionage mission was rendered unnecessary when the Revolutionary War began. Yet Hale forged ahead, which led to his capture by British soldiers. His famous last words were uttered just before he was hanged.

"The true story of Hale, this country's most famous spy, gets too close to the way some of us feel today," one CIA official confided to us. This official described a sense of malaise at headquarters, as the CIA desperately searches for a new mission and new confidence.

The CIA has fallen far to get where it is today. The "culture" that Deutch found upon his arrival was rapidly unraveling, and that could threaten the future viability of the agency.

During the CIA's formative years in the post-World War II era, the agency actively recruited the best and brightest at Ivy League colleges, looking for anti-communists to man its ranks. It was a tight-knit group that ran the CIA like a secret fraternity. Some of the missions, like the Bay of Pigs invasion, ended in disaster, while others were pulled off with guts and guile.

It was the Nixon administration that first asked the CIA to abandon principle in favor of wide-scale covert action. Much of this was on the domestic front, which violated its charter and perverted any lingering sense of a noble mission. By the mid-1970s, the CIA was in a defensive posture, answering angry questions from Congress and struggling to prove it could evolve from the rogue agency it had become. It was around this time that the agency began using a new recruiting policy that employed a psychiatric

screening method called the Personality Assessment System.

A classified, 28-page manual on the system shows the CIA was seeking people who were bright, but not too bright; imaginative, but not creative; sociable and action-oriented, but obedient above all. "They were looking for conformists then," said one CIA official. "People who were imaginative but not pushy." People who were modeled after Nathan Hale.

The recruits hired during this period inevitably frustrated William J. Casey, who ran the agency under President Ronald Reagan. Casey wanted right-wing renegades, such as the ones Nixon had, who would pursue the communist menace using any means necessary.

But the CIA wouldn't go along—not because it was more principled than its forebears, but because it had become a self-protective bureaucracy that was increasingly concerned about keeping its congressional barons happy.

Indeed, a "Top Secret" outside analysis of the CIA culture as it evolved in the last decade concludes: "The CIA's self-image—and its projection to any incoming director—is part of an elaborate self-defense mechanism developed over the years as an artificial protective device in lieu of the normal protections (for non-espionage career civil servants)."

The fall of communism has left the CIA searching for a new mission. As a result, counter-terrorism has gained greater priority, as has nuclear nonproliferation. But so far, its efforts have not been impressive to the "users" of intelligence—the White House and Congress.

Deutch may be just the man needed to revitalize and refocus the agency after its turbulent recent past. Deutch initially declined the job when it was offered. Only after President Clinton agreed to elevate it to a Cabinet-level post did Deutch agree to accept the challenge.

Deutch faces an enormous task in transforming the agency into a lean outfit that can once again be a valuable asset to the president and Congress. If he is successful, the infamous statue of Nathan Hale—its famous but failed progenitor—can be moved from the front door to the back door of the agency, where his misdeeds can safely be forgotten.