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Politics and the CIA

A mischievous attempt to undermine the Central Intelligence Agency is now, in the view of some old CIA hands, well on the way to success. They say that a drastic purge of the agency's leadership which they claim is being "politicized" by the Nixon administration in the manner of the FBI, is now in progress. They fear that, if events are allowed to take their course, the national interest may be gravely damaged.

Officials rebut this by claiming that the "purge" is no more than a series of long-delayed resignations. The "intelligence community," they say, is not being politicized, but is merely being "reorganized" in keeping with a 1971 presidential directive which the previous CIA Director, Richard Helms, failed to carry out. As the directive made clear, they say, Mr. Nixon was concerned with making the intelligence community more efficient, not more political.

Defenders of the CIA reply that Helms, the professional who wanted to keep intelligence out of the political arena, was probably going slow on the Nixon directive in the hope that it might not have to be carried out. His replacement by James R. Schlesinger, the Rand system analyst who worked for Nixon in the Office of Budget Management, and was then appointed head of the Atomic Energy Commission, was, they say, "predetermined." It was Schlesinger who drew up the Nixon intelligence directive.

The intelligence professionals point to the avowedly political direction of the attack on the CIA spearheaded by Joseph Alsop's columns. These articles, they claim, display an advance knowledge of facts about the reorganization, and of sensitive intelligence information, that seem to have come from the White House or Schlesinger.

They point out that the columns have identified the Chairman of the Board of Estimates, John Hui-zenga, one of the most responsible intelligence officials, as the carrier of the "liberal" infection, and that they have proclaimed his impending replacement by "the most pungent and persistent single critic of the CIA estimating-analyzing hierarchy."

This man, Major General Daniel Graham of the DIA, Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency which has carried on bitter feuds with the CIA, has received much praise in several columns which describe in detail the stand he took on a number of sensitive issues, and which imply that his views are closer to those of the White House than are the CIA's. Since the General insists that he is not the source of this information, his colleagues assume that it may have been leaked at a higher level as part of the operation designed to undermine the CIA.

Intelligence officials deny that Hui-zenga, who has a year to go before he becomes eligible for retirement at 60 under the CIA's rules, is being dropped as chairman. They say that Schlesinger has appointed General Graham only as chairman of the new, though admittedly powerful, inter-agency committee which is to be the main tool for the reorganization. The committee is being fashioned into something like the "general staff" of the intelligence community so that it may rise above the persistent rivalries among its disparate parts (especially the conflicts between the military and the civilians.)

Military intelligence has claimed that the CIA, which controls only about 15 per cent of the community's budget resources, has dominated the various parts, instead of coordinating them. But some old CIA hands argued that if Schlesinger's "general staff" was apportioned on this percentage basis, the military would become predominant. The intelligence community might then come to express the institutional interest of the military rather than the national interest which the civilian CIA has sought to safeguard.

In a Solomon's judgment which Schlesinger has communicated to the heads of other agencies, he has split the difference into the equal—or almost equal—parts. Roughly half of the new staff will be in uniform and half out of it. The CIA will have no more than 49 per cent of the staff posts. But the balance may still be held by the "civilians," because the one per cent would be provided by the State

Department's relatively small Intelligence and Research Bureau.

Is this a system analyst's solution, or a politician's inspired compromise? While CIA officials maintain their traditional silence, retired CIA men who are concerned about the organization to which they have given their working lives wonder whether they should counter in public what they describe as the "calumnies" being written about the CIA. They agree that changes are needed, but the signs suggest to them that the baby may be thrown out with the bath water.

They are not worried about the "Department of Dirty Tricks," which has long been due for modernization or the equally overdue staff cuts. They are concerned about the agency's intricate analytical structure whose impartiality is under attack—and whose integrity, they hold, must be protected in the national interest.

It may be that Senator Stuart Symington (D-Mo.), who has often said that the problems of the intelligence community ought to be frankly discussed, is now in a position to chair Senate hearings on the subject. It may be that Schlesinger, who believes that the CIA ought to "open" itself to the public, is now ready to put his views and his plans on record. This may be the only way to maintain the morale of a small but vitally-important part of the intelligence community, the way to undo the harm caused by the publication of indiscriminate charges against the CIA, and to turn what threatens to become a spiteful public controversy into a thoughtful and necessary national debate.

The world is changing, and so is the role and function of intelligence. The CIA has paid a heavy penalty in recent years for refusing to change fast enough. The Nixon-Schlesinger formula may be no more than a long overdue attempt to modernize it. But if that's what it is, both the intelligence community and the public ought to be taken into confidence by the government to the fullest extent possible. So far, they have heard little more than meaningless assurances and innuendo.