Mr. Casey's Testimony
And the Rise of the CIA

If you were looking for signs of the times, the place to be was the confirmation hearing of William V. Casey, the Reagan campaign chairman chosen by the president-elect to be director of the CIA.

Casey could hardly be suspected of being squishy soft on intelligence - he goes back to the days of Wild Bill Donovan and the OSS and was the first one to use the term "rogue elephant," the term used by the former chairman of the Intelligence Committee, Frank Church of Idaho, who has been replaced by Barry Goldwater, who loves the CIA more than the Pentagon.

Casey, who came on during the campaign as a rather bumbling and benevolent, was obviously prepared for defensive action. But so solicitous were the members that he found himself suggesting that CIA detractors were not necessarily disloyal or irrational.

Senator Abjecz

The high point of abjecz came from a Democrat, Joseph Biden, who pleased with the nominee to give the Intelligence Committee "a report card" on its secret-keeping capacity.

Casey was plainly taken aback. He pushed up his sliding spectacles, barked a bit, and began a bemused reply. "I thought I would let this committee investigate me before I investigated you," he said, in his gravelly, Manhattan accent. The members had the grace to chuckle a bit.

But Biden pressed on.
"There is a raging debate," he explained earnestly, "and, his face, aghast with apprehension from the man, he was supposed to judge, whether this committee should have access to certain information."

Casey, recovering from astonishment, gave avuncular reassurance.

"I don't know of any significant transgression on the part of this committee," he said. Biden's face was illuminated with relief.

Sen. Malcolm Wallop, R., Wyo., growled about Americans who "somewhere in another" regard the CIA as an anathema in a free society.

Casey, who had doubtless been preparing rationalizations for the company's excesses in the bad old days of drug experiments, poison plottings and assassination efforts, came to the rescue of critics.
"I think there is a reason," he said, "and must have been surprised to hear himself saying it. There was a time when America had high respect for the value of intelligence... But it was modified by charges that the CIA had become a rogue elephant and you had to focus on reining it in."

If he had not said it, you might almost have thought that the hubbub of 1975 - which even Gerald Ford was forced to heed - had been entirely the work of Kremlin agents.
"I think a good job has been done on that," Casey observed cautiously of the rehabilitation. It was a world-class understatement: The rogue elephant has become a splendid mastiff, guarding us against Soviet wolves.

Nobody came out and asked Casey point-blank if he thought the requirements for 'timely reporting' to Congressional committees on covert activity were intolerable. If he had, there might have been a stampede to repeal them.

Casey, who, in his formal opening statement, had included a chaste reference to "a period of turmoil," kept his head. Invited to rail against post-revelation prohibitions, such as a ban on the hire of reporters and clergymen as part-time spooks, he said he would "adhere to the procedures" while studying "how they work."