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Helms says CIA repeatedly underestimates Soviet power

By Bill Gertz
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The recent congressional barrage against the Central Intelligence Agency and its director, William Casey, has refueled criticism that the agency has consistently underestimated Soviet intentions and capabilities.

Much of the criticism of the agency and its director had been bandied about publicly last week — in comments from the ranking Republican and Democratic members of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Those remarks drew a sharply worded reply from Mr. Casey.

But some of the most surprising charges, expressed in a letter to President Reagan last month, have been leveled by Sen. Jesse Helms, North Carolina Republican.

Mr. Helms' letter, a five-page assessment of recent and past CIA analyses, charged the agency with misreading Soviet intentions and underestimating Soviet capabilities.

As a result, CIA Deputy Director for Intelligence Robert Gates has set up a special CIA task force to review the questions posed by Mr. Helms on a possible CIA analytical bias giving the Soviets the benefit of the doubt, according to congressional sources. Mr. Gates served on the National Security Council during the Carter administration.

"The bias of the CIA for underestimating Soviet intentions and capabilities over the last 25 years has already had a deleterious effect on U.S. national security," Mr. Helms said in his letter. "But the recent implications of information resulting from KGB defections suggests that we should inquire further into the problem of this bias."

The Helms letter quotes Mr. Casey, who said in an internal CIA publication that, "The most frequent criticisms of our interpretations and assessments have shown a tendency to be overly optimistic, to place a benign interpretation on information which could be interpreted as indicating danger."

The larger issue of relations between the intelligence agency and Congress came to a head last Wednesday when Sen. David Durenberger, Minnesota Republican, chairman of the select committee, criticized Mr. Casey and the agency during a luncheon meeting with reporters.

Among Mr. Durenberger's charges was the criticism that CIA analysts have failed to adequately understand the Soviet Union and that the agency lacks a sense of direction.

Mr. Durenberger, who this year replaced Sen. Barry Goldwater, Arizona Republican, as chairman of the intelligence panel, also said that if the committee decided to vote on recommending Mr. Casey's dismissal, the vote would be 8-7 in favor of retaining the director.

The senator's remarks prompted an unusual public attack by Mr. Casey.

Mr. Casey said in a letter released Thursday that the oversight process has "gone awry" and has hurt the CIA by compromising intelligence sources, damaging agency morale and hampering overall intelligence efforts.

He said Mr. Durenberger's comments were disturbing because they had a "disheartening impact on our officers overseas and at home."

"What are they to think when the chairman of the Senate Select Committee offhandedly, publicly and inaccurately disparages their work?" Mr. Casey asked.

Mr. Durenberger charged that his remarks, as reported in The Washington Post, were taken "out of context."

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Mr. Casey appeared unmoved by Mr. Durenberger's effort to clarify his position.

"That's not the point," Mr. Casey wrote in his response. "Public discussion of sensitive information and views revealed in a closed session of an oversight committee is always damaging and inadvisable."

Mr. Casey did not specifically respond to charges that the CIA had underestimated the Soviets, but the director did defend his agency's analysis work as a whole.

Mr. Casey said that recent analyses in support of arms control were praised by former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, representing the president's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board.

In his letter, Mr. Casey pointed to recent CIA analyses of the crisis in the Philippines, Shi'ite Moslem fundamentalism and "the energy problem" as subjects on which the CIA had been "far out in front."

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Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, who is the ranking Democrat on the intelligence panel, said the Casey letter was "unfortunate" and could only make a bad situation worse.

The CIA has been under increasingly intense pressure in the wake of its handling of the case of Soviet KGB official Vitaly Yurchenko, who returned to the Soviet Union after purportedly defecting to the United States. In a highly publicized press conference Nov. 4 at the Soviet Embassy in Washington, Mr. Yurchenko denounced the CIA for kidnapping and drugging him — charges that have been denied by the agency and by Capitol Hill intelligence sources.

Critics claim that whether Mr. Yurchenko was a real defector or a deliberate plant, the CIA was at fault for not handling the case properly. The Senate Intelligence Committee has requested a report from the agency on the affair.

On the question of the agency's analysis of the Soviet Union, Mr. Helms provided details of recent examples he believes indicate a pro-Soviet bias on the part of the CIA. He

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charged the agency with downgrading a previous estimate of the range of a Soviet bomber, "negatively reassessing" Soviet biological and chemical warfare treaty violations and attempting to change methods for monitoring Soviet nuclear tests, thereby altering treaty limits.

He also asserts that the CIA has downgraded its accuracy estimate of the Soviet SS-19 missile, which would have the effect of retroactively altering the findings of a 1978 study of Soviet missile accuracy conducted by a team of experts from outside the agency.

The senator also charges that the agency "is denying the possibility of Soviet mole penetrations and deception in [human intelligence] espionage channels."

In his letter, Mr. Helms requested answers to a series of que tions that indicate a CIA bias on Soviet analysis.

Among the questions were the following:

- Does the CIA review its analyses to check for a possible pro-Soviet bias in classified and unclassified analytical products?
- Is there a possible pro-Soviet bias in many CIA products over the past 20 years?
- Does the CIA find any evidence of "pro-Soviet penetrations, moles or bias" in Soviet affairs intelligence in the past 20 years?
- Did CIA underestimates of Soviet ICBM accuracy result in an added five-year period of U.S. vulnerability to Soviet nuclear attack?

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