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'Chaotic personal life' casts pall on Durenberger intelligence role

Second of two parts.

By Bill Gertz
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There is growing concern in the intelligence agencies that Sen. David Durenberger's tortuous and tangled private life has seriously damaged his ability to effectively lead the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, which is charged with overseeing the way the American intelligence system operates.

Since taking control of the panel 14 months ago, Mr. Durenberger, 51, Minnesota Republican, has achieved national attention not only as a high-profile, activist committee chairman, but for his chaotic personal life as well.

Revelations about Mr. Durenberger's marital problems and subsequent affair with a former employee have strengthened the arguments of critics who complain that Mr. Durenberger is not the best man to head the sensitive panel.

Professionally, Mr. Durenberger's critics say the senator has moved away from the laissez-faire approach adopted by his predecessor, Sen. Barry Goldwater, and has tried to use the intelligence post to influence the course of U.S. foreign policy.

As a result, some observers say the panel's new aggressive style is reminiscent of the late 1970s when Sen. Frank Church headed the committee and regularly pilloried the intelligence community in public hearings.

"He still has the attitude that what we want to do is restrain things and have a Church-style approach [to oversight]," said one committee staff member who declined to be named.

During his tenure Mr. Durenberger has opposed the Reagan administration's use of covert action programs, openly feuded with CIA Director William Casey, made several controversial staff changes, faced criticism that serious leaks about U.S. covert action programs came from Congress, and started a committee public relations program that some experts believe is hazardous for intelligence work. Mr. Durenberger declined to be interviewed for this article.

The 15-member committee, first constituted in 1976, was set up to be the exclusive Senate body monitoring the CIA.

Always a hotbed of controversy, the committee has wavered over the years from operating in relative obscurity to being the focus of national attention. Its first chairman, Sen. Daniel Inouye, Hawaii Democrat, is little remembered, in contrast to the flamboyant style of former chairman Church.

Now, the committee's public profile is on an upswing. Mr. Durenberger's direct criticism about how the administration handles intelligence issues is raising the hackles of professionals in the community and fellow senators who believe the best thing to say publicly about sensitive intelligence matters is nothing at all.

Mr. Goldwater, who left the committee in January 1985 to take over the Senate Armed Services Committee, has opposed the existence of the oversight committee since its establishment.

"When I was chairman, I couldn't prevent the members from using" the classified information they came across, Mr. Goldwater said, criticizing the use of the committee as a vehicle to influence the administration's foreign policy. "But I tried to point out to them that it was an abuse of senatorial privilege."

Sen. Malcolm Wallop, Wyoming Republican, who lost a political maneuver in January 1985 to become chairman of the panel, remains critical of the committee's work.

"There is a great need for expertise and continuity" on the committee, said Mr. Wallop, who spent eight years on the committee — the maximum allowed under law. "There are too many people, too many leaks, too much involvement, too much turnover on the staff, and no real appraisal of what it is that we seek to achieve in oversight."

For the last year, Mr. Durenberger has lived at the Cedars, an evangelical Christian fellowship house in Arlington after splitting up with his wife of 14 years. He is also undergoing psychological counseling in Boston.

Several experts interviewed about the general problem — without specific reference to Mr. Durenberger — gave mixed answers about the potential security problems posed by the mental health traumas he faces.

Federal guidelines, which apply only to executive branch employees, but not to members of Congress or their staffs, normally would disqualify an individual from working in a security-sensitive area if they are believed to be mentally unstable, according to George Woloshyn, an associate director of the Office of Personnel Management who is responsible for overseeing federal background investigations.

"Basically a person who is psychologically unbalanced ... is not fully in control of his faculties," Mr. Woloshyn said. "Where there is suspicion that an individual may not have a sufficient sense of personal responsibility to safeguard information ... there's no doubt in my mind that that person ought not gain access to sensitive information."

A senior administration intelligence expert said CIA guidelines outlining conditions under which a Sensitive Compartmented Information clearance — the highest level security clearance — can be withdrawn include such personal problems as separation or divorce, extramarital affairs, psychiatic care or unorthodox social behavior, according to an adminstration security expert.

While Mr. Durenberger, as a member of Congress, is not required to have a security clearance he is granted access — as a committee member — to Sensitive Compartmented Information.

"Durenberger's case easily meets the standards for which a security clearance would be revoked, at least until his problems are resolved," said the official who declined to be identified.

Psychiatrist Fredric Solomon — who has studied ways to prevent disturbed persons from attacking public officials for the U.S. Secret Service — said the fact that a person is seeking either psychological or psychiatric counseling does not constitute a danger to secret intelligence work.

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