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Books in the news

How ex-chief views the CIA

Secrecy and Democracy

The CIA in Transition. By Stansfield Turner. Houghton Mifflin. \$16.95.

By Robert S. Smith

In 1977 President Carter tapped Adm. Stansfield Turner, one of the Navy's best and brightest, to head the Central Intelligence Agency in the troubled period after a Senate committee exposed CIA misdeeds. Four years later, after reorganizing its massive bureaucracy and integrating high technology into an espionage world dominated by human spies, Turner was replaced by the Reagan administration's William Casey. This book is a record of his watch at the CIA.

Turner's tenure was no easy task, but in a turbulent time his was a fairly steady hand on the helm. He lost as many battles as he won, but he brought a level of courage and honesty to the post few other CIA chiefs have.

His main problems were reinventing his covert operators and melding the efforts of the CIA with other intelligence agencies—National Security Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency and the State Department's Bureau of Research.

But Turner was never able to control the covert side and errs in writing that the 1947 CIA charter says nothing about covert action. The smogball phrase authorizing such actions as the overthrow of Salvador Allende in Chile and the restoration of the shah of Iran to his throne reads that the CIA shall perform "such other functions and duties related to intelligence affecting the national security as the National Security Council may from time to time direct."

Boiled into plain English, this means that the CIA can do whatever the president wants, whatever it thinks he wants, or whatever it believes he would want if he thought about it. Covert activities were what caused Harry Truman to say that creating the CIA was his biggest mistake.

Although Turner admits losing some skirmishes, he avoids blame the way Dracula did garlic. To reduce a swollen espionage staff, he fired 820 people in the so-called "Halloween Massacre" in 1977. The act was long overdue, but he handled it poorly, sending a brusque note to those afflicted. He now claims that his chiefs advised him against a more gracious note.

On his two biggest flaps—the downfall of the shah of Iran and the "discovery" of a so-called "combat brigade" of Russians in Cuba in 1979—he gives flaccid rationalizations. No one could have foreseen the fragility of the shah, Turner says in effect, and it was NSA that goofed on the Cuban affair. The brigade was a training unit that had been in Cuba for years. The CIA knew about it, but Turner was unable

or unwilling to keep conservatives from using it to stymie ratification of the SALT II arms control treaty.

Self-criticism is alien to a man who sprinkles his prose with statements like, "I weathered the NSC meeting because I had done more extensive homework than anyone else in the room."

As a military man, however, Turner easily sees through the tendency of the military to present worst-case assessments of Soviet power, writing, "The budgetary process virtually forces the military to use intelligence to overstate the threats they must be ready to counter."

Turner has harsh words for the way President Reagan has "unleashed" the CIA under William Casey. An apolitical CIA has disappeared, as has effective congressional oversight. Casey is now immersed in policy formation and is running the illegal contras and mining harbors in Nicaragua in violation of both international law and the 1982 Boland Amendment forbidding funds for the purpose of destabilizing Nicaragua.

"The Reagan transition team that descended on CIA in 1980 was as unbalanced and uninformed a group on this subject as I can imagine," Turner comments, a conclusion possibly triggered by the fact that CIA censors took 18 months to read his manuscript, but made only three concessions on more than 100 deletions.

Turner ends his book urging more congressional oversight of the CIA, expansion of intelligence analysis beyond current events and Soviet military strength; increased attention to terrorism, narcotics and nuclear proliferation; new and nonpolitical chiefs for the intelligence agencies, and less covert action.

The way things are going a major CIA overhaul will be necessary. It does not appear likely that it can happen until the president and Congress forgo their macho views and restore the CIA to its proper place in national and world affairs.

Robert S. Smith was a member of the U.S. intelligence community for nearly 25 years.