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Review

LOS ANGELES TIMES
11 August 1985

Secrecy & Democracy

The CIA in Transition

by Stansfield Turner (Houghton Mifflin: \$16.95, hardcover; 285 pp.)

Nobody could ever accuse me of being soft on Stansfield Turner. It was he who in 1978 prompted the government to take me to court for publishing my own CIA memoir without the Agency's approval. On page two of this chronicle of his own years in the CIA, as President Carter's Director of Central Intelligence, he attempts to justify that decision by suggesting that I broke a personal promise to him guaranteeing him a look at my manuscript. Turner knows this isn't so, and testified that it wasn't at my trial. But never mind this small glitch in his memory. Suffice it to say there is no love lost between us.

With that understood, I can honestly report that there is much about his memoir that I would recommend to both liberal and conservative friends. Liberals will take heart from his staunch opposition to "covert action"—those CIA dirty tricks aimed at

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destabilizing other governments. Conservatives will delight in the way he snipes at other Carterites, particularly former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, whom he blames for the step-up in covert action that actually punctuated the last year of the Carter presidency.

When Turner took over as director in 1977, the CIA was hunkering down. Congress had just completed a wrenching probe of its past excesses. The U.S. withdrawal from Indochina had brought an end to some of its most ambitious operations. And public outrage over CIA involvement in Chile and Angola had prompted Congress to impose the first shreds of restraining "oversight" legislation.

Prudence should have counseled the new director to go slow. He didn't. He came on like Mr. Clean, determined to shake up the place, even though by all signs what was needed was a little soothing tranquility. He fired or forced into retirement a number of old-timers, brought in outsiders to head up the CIA's major branches, and sought to have himself appointed intelligence czar with the power to hire and fire employees of all the nation's spy agencies. This was too much. The resulting controversy very nearly completed the demolition work Congress had started, and by the beginning of his second year in office, Turner, reportedly, was on the verge of being fired himself.

From the self-portrait that emerges in this memoir it is readily apparent why he

always seemed the odd man out. Though he'd acquitted himself famously as a Rhodes Scholar, NATO commander and as the innovative president of the Naval War College, he knew nothing of intelligence work and was even a little contemptuous of it. ("Bush leagues" was how he referred to the intelligence community when he first learned he was to be director).

Even worse, he brought to his new assignment an obstinacy and fixation with protocol that was surely better suited to the

military than to the congregation of bruised egos and eccentric personalities that made up the intelligence community in the late 1970s. Worse still, once the old timers began repaying his intolerance with a bit of the same, he seemed incapable of keeping things in perspective. At one point in his book he tells of firing a CIA operations officer who'd lied to him about having an affair with a female agent. Granted, the liaison was improper and the man's duplicity more so. He should have been punished for it. But to suggest, as Turner does, that his control of the CIA was at stake and that discipline might have unraveled everywhere if he hadn't acted decisively seems to tell us more

about his own insecurity than about the foibles of the CIA's rank and file.

Since Turner came to CIA headquarters with a preconceived commitment to reform, he almost had to find something there worth reforming. And to judge from his book, he did. He says the entire organization was cowering in fear of public criticism and that the covert action cupboard was almost bare. He claims that the analysts were pedantic, that they were contemptuous of unclassified research and of anyone outside the flow of official secrets, and that the operatives had no qualms about rewriting the director's orders to suit themselves. Of the intelligence community as a whole, which nom-

inally he headed as Director of Central Intelligence, he says that there was more rivalry than cooperation, with the eavesdropping National Security Agency leading the pack in insubordination.

In short, the picture he gives us of the intelligence community is disturbing indeed. If you take it at face value, then the CIA's critics were right in the mid-'70s when they denounced the agency as a rogue elephant and a pretty useless one at that.

The question is: How much of it do you take at face value?

As a former CIA officer who labored in the traces up through 1976, I can say that Turner's complaints about the analytical branch have the ring of truth, though I suspect that some of the deficiencies he found there were a function of the Carter Administration's own foreign policy problems. When a President is reduced merely to reacting to events abroad, it's difficult for the CIA's crystal-ball gazers to do the kind of politically relevant, long-range forecasting that the admiral rightly believes is their proper function.

As for his complaints about the intelligence community at large, once again he seems fairly well on the mark: The dozen or so agencies that make it up are less a tightly knit fraternity than a confederacy of conflicting fiefdoms. But the issue Turner does not adequately address in his book is whether this is a bad thing. Fleetingly he recognizes that the pooling of the awesome powers of espionage in the hands of a single intelligence czar could be dangerous, both for the intelligence business and for the country. And yet, in the same breath he argues that efficiency demands it.

In explaining why he couldn't sell this idea to Jimmy Carter, he says simply that the President had become too fond of reading uncoordinated "raw intelligence" reports from the separate spy agencies. But it seems just as likely that somebody in the White House realized that the only intelligence czar this country can safely tolerate is its principal elected official.

Far and away the most doubtful of Turner's judgments are those that have to do with what he delicately describes as the "dark science" of espionage. While he's absolutely correct in saying that "technospies"—high-flying aircraft and other surveillance gadgetry—are steadily upstaging human spies as important intelligence sources, he seems to me to carry his argument too far. In one flourish he tells us that classic espionage seldom produces any more than "background" information—a debatable proposition at best considering that during part of his own CIA tour the agency had a productive agent inside the Soviet foreign ministry and another operating alongside the KGB contingent at the United Nations. What's more, it's obvious from recent espionage cases involving Soviet agents operating here in the United States that a well-placed spy network can gather

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intelligence that's worth its weight in gold.

Even more troubling is the way Turner tries to put down the CIA's spymasters themselves. There's no question that when he became director the agency's clandestine operatives were champing at the unaccustomed bit of congressional oversight and were overly sensitive to any hint that they might be subjected to more of the same. But what Turner doesn't tell us is that he went out of his way to deepen their worries by immediately signaling his intent to pare their ranks and by bringing in novices from the Navy, the RAND Corp. and elsewhere to see how it ought to be done. Having just been through an orgy of investigations, they found themselves facing more of the same—only this time from their own commander in chief. What remained of their morale buckled.

To make matters worse, Turner's attitude towards them was at best condescending, and at times witheringly moralistic. Even in his book he betrays the facile judgments that made him so inflammatory a director. At one point he describes the recruiting of spies—the primary job of the CIA's espionage shop—as little more than salesmanship that any well-trained salesman could perform. This so misrepresents the complexities of espionage that it's difficult to believe he really subscribed to it.

Elsewhere he waxes mournful about the psychological pressures of spycraft, pictures some of the CIA's key practitioners as emotionally deformed paranoids, and adds for good measure that few of them ever face real danger except perhaps the always risky temptation to flout CIA rules and regulations. Leaving aside whether any of this is true—and I tend to believe the picture is overdrawn—can you wonder that the CIA's spy-handlers had trouble reconciling themselves to a director who held such views?

Turner's crudest assault on the CIA's espionage branch came over Halloween weekend 1977 when he launched a spate of firings and forced retirements to clear out the deadwood. He claims in his book that the "Halloween Massacre" was fully justified by the fact that nearly 30% of the clandestine operatives were approaching the agency's early retirement age. He also accuses the press of grossly exaggerating its impact and the number of operatives affected (no more than 164 were actually forced out, he says).

What he doesn't mention is that because of resulting resentments and morale problems, as well as normal attrition, more than 1,000 experienced CIA officials quit the agency in the next two years and that he was forced to rehire some of them on contract simply to meet daily need.

Nor does he really own up to his own mishandling of the affair. Though he tells us that embittered CIA retirees and the press whipped up a crisis where there didn't have to be one, the fact is he helped fan the flames himself by callously insulting those he'd booted out, decrying them in the press as "crybabies" for not taking their pink slips lying down.

In the end, of course, all of Turner's missteps might have been forgiven if he'd excelled at his own primary job as the nation's principal "watch officer" and forecaster of dire events. But unfortunately he didn't. While technical intelligence sources enabled him to keep the President one step ahead of the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979, the Soviet push into Afghanistan, and the build-up of Soviet forces on Poland's borders, he stumbled badly when asked to provide political intelligence on the gravest crisis of the Carter Administration, the upheaval in Iran. The main problem, he says, was the failure of CIA analysts to key on warning signals that were available for all to see. But even this explanation deserves to be re-examined in light of U.S. intelligence

documents seized during the embassy takeover in Teheran and recently published by the Iranian government.

According to these files, CIA analysts were not so myopic as Turner claims. As early as 1976 they recognized the shah's instability, the weakness of his army, the lethal potential of the religious mullahs, and, most important, the blind spots in U.S. intelligence. Turner had two years to catch up on all this, and to patch up the problems. He didn't. His memoir doesn't explain why.

What it does give us is the portrait of an enlightened advocate of intelligence reform—Turner as he would like to be remembered. Accordingly, he presents himself as being fully in favor of Congressional oversight, and is sharply critical of his successor, William Casey, for not keeping Congress fully informed of key espionage operations, such as the *Contra* effort in Nicaragua. He also professes to believe that the CIA ought not to

opt for secrecy for secrecy's sake, and should attempt to declassify as much of its research as it can.

All this will be music to the ears of civil libertarians and liberal lawmakers—unless of course somebody thinks to check Turner's record. In fact, as CIA director, he did not always distinguish himself in his dealings with Congress. He refused to assure the oversight committee advance notice of important espionage operations, even though the law required it, and he actively fought to water down a proposed comprehensive "charter" for the intelligence community, even though he now claims to favor one.

Even worse, though you wouldn't know it from his book, he sided with those in the Carter Administration who decided to let former CIA director Richard Helms plea-bargain his way out of a perjury charge after he failed to testify honestly to Congress. At stake was whether an intelligence chief could be punished for flouting the principles of accountability. Turner backed those who favored a soft touch, thus sending the worst possible signal to those in the intelligence community who felt they could cut legal corners with impunity.

As for his professed commitment to "openness" in government, there's a smattering of hypocrisy in that too. Though he excoriates the Reagan CIA for trying to manipulate press leaks for political purposes, he did it too, through a large PR staff that he created at CIA headquarters to flog his own version of the truth.

More seriously, during his reign as director, he fought to exempt even unclassified CIA files from the reach of the Freedom of Information Act, and, through the lawsuit against me, nailed down a system of censorship that encompasses even the unclassified writings of past and present CIA employees (hence, this entire review was handed over to the CIA's censors).

Belatedly, Turner now realizes the error of his ways. In the preface of his book, he complains that the CIA's current board of censors abused their power in vetoing his manuscript, arbitrarily snipping out more than 100 items that presumably ought to have been left in. Nobody who believes in the sanctity of the First Amendment could do any more than sympathize with him.

Still, it's not as if he had not had fair warning. When another former CIA director, William Colby, submitted his memoir to Turner's censors in 1977, he too encountered arbitrariness and abuse and complained about both. Turner could have made adjustments then. But he didn't. Instead, stung by criticism of his overall performance, he continued to endorse censorship as a way of disciplining the CIA's rank and file. It's only faint consolation to see him now hoist by his own petard.

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