COMMONWEAL
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WASHINGTON REPORT

APPOINTMENTS CALENDAR

President Carter made a serious mistake in his original appointment of Theodore Sorensen to head the CIA in an era when that agency simply has to be stopped from burglarizing, eavesdropping upon and, from time to time as occasion may suggest, killing American citizens, an era, too, when the agency's historic policy of conducting international relations through assassination and the deliberate wrecking of the economy of foreign nations must be reexamined.

The mistake was not, as is generally thought around here, in nominating Sorensen without clearing it with the Senate's hawk establishment, nor, as is universally accepted, in backing off too quickly, failing to go all out for Sorensen. No, the mistake was in the appointment itself. Sorensen's pinnacle of public service was as speech writer to John F. Kennedy, a role for which he displayed considerable talent, emerging as a kind of William Safire with class. The talents of the speech writer are not those principally needed to run the CIA even in times when we were all more innocent about that gang than we are now. Actually, of the old guard, the best available man for that spot would have been James Schlesinger, who, briefly in the job, started the investigation of illegal activities at home and abroad that led to Dan Schorr's forced retirement but not yet, so far as we know, to any real reform. Sorensen's best known effort was, of course, the famed inaugural address of Kennedy, which, if you think about it, can be read as an open season hunting license for the CIA, as also for the FBI in its own assorted assaults on the Constitution and the citizenry. We will bear any burden: Richard Helms, Howard Hunt, J. Edgar Hoover as public "servants" compose a formidable burden; we will travel any distance: to Vietnam and Cambodia, to the Bay of Pigs, to Santiago, Chile, where it's raining and Dr. Allende is ingeniously committing suicide by dive bomber. Those are burdens and distances we don't really need the new head of the CIA to shoulder and to shuffle yet again.

As things have worked out, and by pure inadvertence on the part of the Senate's hawk aviary, Carter will end up with an incalculably more competent man out at Langley, his Annapolis classmate but not really old school chum, Admiral Stansfield Turner. Turner will bring a lot more to the job than administrative competence, more even than the administrative brilliance with which he is freely credited by almost everyone who has seen him at work. As it happens, I've seen him at work myself, found myself working with him, or for him, and emerged from the experience in frank admiration of the openness of the mind to unusual suggestions, the willingness to entertain unorthodox assumptions and the energy and style brought to bear upon activities generated from some assumptions.

I first heard of, and from, Stansfield Turner, five years ago. He was president of the Naval War College at Newport and wanted me to come up to take part in something called a Military-Media Conference. I had no clear idea of what such a thing might be. Neither did anyone else. Admiral Turner was inventing it. The form was simple, long familiar to those who attend seminars, conferences and conventions: two or three days beginning with plenary sessions and formal addresses, going on to small groups of students talking with the visiting "experts," usually one or two of us to twelve to twenty of them, ending formally with a dinner featuring remarks in a lighter tone, and informally in prolonged sessions in the bars of Newport and Jamestown, the Flag Cabins of the base and the president's house.

In form, nothing especially remarkable. But in content: in 1972, when Turner started what has become a high growth industry in all the military services, the war in Indochina was still raging away in what then seemed its eternal course, military people at large, but especially those with Vietnam service, were absolutely convinced that they—and their country—had been betrayed by the American press, reporters and news analysts, on the other hand, were no less convinced that the war was insane, criminal even, at best an effort to destroy Indochina in order to save it, at worst a dark scheme to extend or protect the holdings of ITT, Chase Manhattan and the oil cartel by the endless slaughter of American youths and the general population of the region. A service war college is not a service academy; its students are field-grade officers in mid-career, who have been carefully selected by the system as likely candidates for the higher reaches of command in the future: they're an elite, intelligent, dedicated, narrow, as is the way with most elites. The journalists were no less selected—by Stansfield Turner. There were, to be sure, a few journalists that journalists like me regard as unpaid—as far as is known—flacks for the arms industry, military affairs columnists holding reserve commissions, people who wear neckties with the American flag tastefully incorporated in the design, that sort of thing. But they were a tiny minority. By and large, the journalists present were the real thing and deeply opposed to the war on the obvious intellectual, moral and historical grounds, or on the ground of having been on the ground, or both. In short, the first Military-Media Conference had all the elements for a riot, a slaughter, a few muggings, a few bodies found floating in Narragansett Bay.