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Turner Walks Narrow Line in Remaking CIA Image

This is the first of two articles on problems in the Central Intelligence Agency and how its new director is to solve them.

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Langley, Va. — President Carter's pledge to reorganize the Federal Government is getting its toughest test behind closed doors at the Central Intelligence Agency.

Failure to provide effective safeguards against the excesses of the past could lead to serious embarrassments for Carter, or worse, a major diplomatic confrontation.

But an overreaction in the direction of reform could destroy agency morale, cripple vital intelligence operations, and leave the nation vulnerable to undetected Soviet military or political advances.

The man charged with treading this narrow line, Adm. Stansfield Turner, the new CIA director, talked about the problem and his seven months in office during a lengthy interview with the Bulletin in his office here.

"What I'm doing is trying to manage this place so that I know what's going on," he said. "It's big and that's difficult and there's no formula I can give you that says I guarantee I know everything sensitive that's going on."

At the same time, he warned that any CIA directors or employees found withholding vital information from superiors will be fired — as three have been, Turner said, since he took office March 9.

He outlined these steps he said have been taken to guard against a repeat of the illegal activities and loose administration that critics have cited in recent years:

—820 employees of the covert and clandestine branch of the CIA — the "dirty trick" directorate — will be discharged over the next 26 months. All are employed in the United States and were described by Turner as part of the "fat" in the agency, much of it left over from Vietnam. Covert operations, he said, are less important today compared to careful "analytical" work.

—No covert activity can be undertaken without written consent of the

President and subsequent "timely" notification to eight committees of Congress.

—"Competitive analysis" is being stressed to insure that the President gets "reasoned dissenting views" on intelligence questions, not merely the CIA's consensus finding or recommendation. To oversee this, Turner has brought in a new man, professor Robert R. Bowie of Harvard.

Critics of the agency have charged, however, that the White House, rather than exercising restraint on the CIA, has pressed it frequently to undertake questionable missions — assassination attempts and political coups, such as the toppling of the Allende regime in Chile.

Turner conceded that this "was a serious problem in the agency's past."

He spoke of orders "often handled through informal channels . . . you know, you could have a telephone call right out to here, or something like that, that would bypass the system."

The director refused to name those who had misused the agency, but critics have accused former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger of unduly influencing agency estimates and activities during his years in Washington. Turner insisted such transgressions are unlikely today.

"I think the procedure for approving activities of the CIA have become much more institutionalized," Turner said, "which means there will be a number of people who will feel a sense of responsibility to get up and say to somebody who's trying to make us do something, we shouldn't. 'You're on a wrong tack, Mr. Secretary of State, Mr. President, Mr. Whoever it is.'"

Would Turner seriously consider challenging the President on such an issue?

"If there were anything illegal in what he was talking about . . . I would have to resign before I would do it," Turner declared.

At another point in the interview, Turner added, "There's no question that if somebody comes and tells me to go assassinate somebody, I'll resign before I even contemplate it, because there's a presidential order out saying don't do it" and because of "my own conviction that it is not a useful tool for the country."

But what if the presidential order were not illegal, but questionable morally?

"If I felt it was unethical or below our standards of propriety, I'd go debate it with the President," Turner said. "And at that point, if the President held his ground . . . I'd have to sit back and make up my mind. That's the tough time. But I'd have to be prepared to resign in that event."

Throughout the interview, Turner returned to the theme that safeguards have been "institutionalized," that knowledge of wrongdoing within the CIA can no longer be confined to a few overzealous operatives, that Congress has acquired a larger oversight role.

"You still have the backstop that even if I didn't have the right guts," Turner insisted, "it still goes to eight (congressional) committees. And the Intelligence Oversight Board would get word of it at this point — almost undoubtedly."

"All these people would be in the act and if I were right and the President was wrong, he'd find a lot of pressure on him," Turner said.

Outside the agency, critics remain skeptical that the CIA, often described as the President's "private army," can withstand White House pressure to undertake unwise, immoral or even illegal operations.

Sen. Clifford P. Case (R-NJ), a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee preparing legislation that will give the CIA a new "charter," was hopeful but plainly pessimistic: "It's my hope the agency can be brought under proper control," he said in an interview, "but, well, how can you know?"

In the last analysis, the responsibility falls on Turner himself, as he conceded.

"It's going to depend on the moral fortitude of the guy at that desk," he commented, pointing across the room to his own desk.

"He's got to have the fortitude to tell his superiors — wherever they are — no, and he's got to have the determination to tell his subordinates, don't run around pretending you're going to do things without my knowing it because you don't want me to know it," Turner declared.

At least one frequent critic of the CIA, John Marks, a former state de-

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partment intelligence officer, takes some comfort from Turner's early moves.

"He's a law and order man," Marks commented. "I think Carter put him in there with instructions that there be no more scandals, no surprises."

Turner's house-cleaning in the covert and clandestine sections, he said, will rid the CIA of case officers, paramilitary personnel and logistics experts with a long commitment to so-called black operations, Marks said, and "should give heart to the analysts." He estimated that the 820-member reduction will trim the covert and clandestine staffs by up to one-fourth.

"I think he's trying to get control of the place," Marks theorized, "and one quick way is to get rid of these people."

Turner's other concern is the quality of the intelligence produced by the agency, the raw data on which foreign policy is formulated. Here his critics have less confidence in his ability to improve the agency.

His biggest problem, Turner declared, is "leaks" — within the government and Congress, but also among defense contractors. And he has warned contractors, he added, that those who don't tighten security could lose government work.

The leakage also threatens relations with intelligence agencies of friendly governments, Turner added, and has complicated the recruitment of agents abroad.

"If you approach a man in some foreign country and say, 'Would you like to be an agent for us?' you don't like to get the answer, 'Oh, I'd love to but I don't want my name in the Washington Post,'" he said.

To cure the problem, Turner said he is declassifying a large volume of CIA data and reports "to put a greater emphasis on that which needs to remain classified." And he is pressing for the

formation of single committees in the Senate and House to which the CIA must report.

His critics, however, see Turner's preoccupation with management safeguards and a better public image for the agency as likely to take some toll of its intelligence gathering capacity.

One former high-level CIA executive, who asked not to be identified, said morale is still poor within the agency and that many people there feel Turner's real priority is the establishment of a new management scheme "downtown" that would put him atop all U.S. intelligence agencies — including those at the state and defense departments — and relegate the CIA to the status of merely one among equals.

They question his knowledge of the intelligence "trade" and say they fear his military chain-of-command-style management will destroy the informality on which the CIA has thrived.

"I'm told," said one former CIA official, "that they have not been overly impressed by his presentations so far at the White House."

And within the intelligence community here some sources — even those who applaud Turner's effort to tighten control on covert operations — question his determination to "go public."

A casual, friendly man, he has embarked on a program of public appearances and speeches and meeting with reporters unprecedented for the nation's spy chief. It is, he apparently believes, the only way to rehabilitate an agency tarred by political misdeeds and headed by a succession of short-term directors with little standing at the White House or in Congress.

Turner's chief asset, said one former high CIA official, is his relationship with Carter, a classmate at Annapolis. The official explained:

"He has access to the President and he seems to have his confidence, and not many recent DCIs (Directors of Central Intelligence) have had that. It's what he does with it that counts. And so far I'd say the reviews are mixed."

Next: The Changing Intelligence Problem.