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SUBJECT Bush and the CIA

JANE PAULEY: If George Bush is elected President come November, he will be the only American President ever to have served as the Director of the CIA. Not much is known about Bush's tenure as the country's chief spymaster, which is the topic this morning of NBC's national political correspondent, Ken Bode, who is in our Washington Newsroom.

Good morning, Ken.

KEN BODE: Good morning.

Until now, Bush's time at the CIA has been little more than a line on his resume. By its nature, the CIA is shrouded in secrecy, and the Vice President has refused to talk about it. Today a lengthy article appears on "Bush and the CIA" in Mother Jones Magazine. It's written by Scott Armstrong and Jeff Nason, two journalists who specialize in reporting on intelligence activities.

What did George Bush actually do as CIA Director? What happened while he was there? And what do those who worked with him say about his leadership?

Those are some of the things the article covers.

[Film clip of Bush's swearing-in at CIA Director.]

BODE: January, 1976: George Bush takes over at CIA; the agency under attack in the press, under investigation on Capitol Hill; morale low.

Armstrong and Nason conducted over a hundred interviews

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with people who worked for or with George Bush, asking how did he operate.

SCOTT ARMSTRONG: We looked at not only the one year that Bush was Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, but we looked at the previous five years. We looked at the period when he'd been at the U. N. We looked at the period when he was in China. What we found was remarkably consistent. Here was a man who was virtually totally deferential to his aides. He literally turned over the store, in the case of the CIA, to his aides.

BODE: Bush focused on rebuilding morale from the inside.

GEORGE BUSH: It's a slanderous outrage to the professionals with him I'm privileged to work in CIA.

BODE: Also on restoring CIA credibility in Congress. For this, and only this, the authors give Bush high marks.

JEFF NASON: Well, he established a really good, sound relationship with the lawmakers on the Hill who were -- who were focusing in on the intelligence community and the CIA, in particular. Some of those people on the Hill at the time told us that he became more or less a member of the club, somebody that they could trust.

BODE: February. President Gerald Ford issues an executive order reorganizing American intelligence. CIA Director Bush has no influence on the results. Armstrong says Bush really had little to do with running the CIA.

ARMSTRONG: The operational decisions were made at least once, sometimes two, sometimes three layers below Bush. Many of them never filtered up to him at all. He was, for all practical purposes, out of the loop on virtually everything.

BODE: "Out of the loop": what's that mean?

ARMSTRONG: George Bush uses the phrase "out of the loop" to refer to lack of operational control, a lack of operational responsibility for things that he's involved in. He used it in the case of Iran-contra.

What we found was that George Bush has made a career of being out of the loop.

BODE: June, 1976. A wave of international terrorism begins; American Ambassador to Lebanon Francis Malloy assassinated. September: former Chilean Ambassador, Orlando Letelier, blown up in broad daylight in downtown Washington. It became

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obvious that rogue foreign intelligence agencies from places like Chile, Iran, South Africa and South Korea were operating unrestrained in the U. S. Armstrong and Nason say they were illegally harassing, wire-tapping, beating and kidnaping their exiled populations here, but Bush decided to look the other way.

ARMSTRONG: And when he looked around and decided to ask his people "How do we collect information on terrorism?," they said "We do it through cooperative foreign intelligence agencies." And so Bush was reluctant to crack down on the very same people that he was going to rely on for information about foreign terrorism.

BODE: In October, a Cuban civilian airliner was blown up off Barbados. Anti-Castro Cubans with links to the CIA were implicated. Also that fall, the CIA learned that one of its former agents, Edwin Wilson, was training Libyan terrorists, planning to sell Red-Eye missiles to Libya. The authors say Bush did the least he could to help the Justice Department investigate such activities.

ARMSTRONG: While he cooperated with the Department of Justice in the investigations, it appears that he was dragging his feet throughout much of the investigations. It appears that he did what he could to prevent information from coming out. Any of those things could explode on him at a future point after he became President.

BODE: In sum, the authors describe George Bush as a CIA Director who professional spies loved because he let the agency run itself; who did a good job testifying for the CIA on Capitol Hill, but who did little to curb internal CIA abuses and nothing to restrain foreign intelligence agents operating in the United States.

ARMSTRONG: I think that for George Bush, his year at the Central Intelligence Agency has to be a major minus for him.

BODE: NBC provided the Vice President's office with an advanced copy of the Armstrong-Nason article. We asked them to provide a spokesman to comment on the characterizations and conclusions in the article, but they declined.

Back to New York.

PAULEY: All right, Ken. Thank you. Coming up now, 22 after the hour.