

# RADIO TV REPORTS, INC.

4701 WILLARD AVENUE, CHEVY CHASE, MARYLAND 20815 (301) 656-4068

---

FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS STAFF

PROGRAM The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour STATION WETA-TV  
PBS Network

DATE February 1, 1989 7:00 P.M. CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT CIA Director William Webster Interviewed

JIM LEHRER: William Webster is first tonight, with his first television interview since becoming Director of Central Intelligence two years ago. George Bush held that same job, himself, under President Ford. And one of the first decisions he made after his own election as President was to ask Mr. Webster to stay on the job. Mr. Webster had been Director of the FBI for nine years when chosen by President Reagan to take over the CIA in March 1987. He was a federal judge in St. Louis before that.

The interview was taped earlier this evening. The first question: Do you agree with Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov that the odds are against Mikhail Gorbachev surviving as the leader of the Soviet Union?

DIRECTOR WILLIAM WEBSTER: Well, I suppose if you want to look at the long term and look at all the obstacles that face this one leader, a safe bet would say that no ordinary person is going to make it. But this is no ordinary person. And I don't think we ought to base our policy conclusions on the assumption that he is not going to make, in the course of his career, very substantial and significant changes in Soviet Russia.

LEHRER: Are the obstacles the obstacles we've all heard and talked about? I mean just the reality of what the Soviet Union is now. Or are they internal political problems, that other people in the leadership don't want him to succeed? What's the scope of the problem?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Well, in the first place, he faces -- many people call them, for conversation purposes, conservatives, who believe this is a major departure from the Marxist-Leninist ideology, that he's getting dangerously close to democratic

---

OFFICES IN: WASHINGTON D.C. • NEW YORK • LOS ANGELES • CHICAGO • DETROIT • AND OTHER PRINCIPAL CITIES

institutions and practices. Glasnost, for instance, and all the freedoms it implies. A concern that he will not and should not try to decentralize many of the decision-making processes. The Soviet Union deals in management-by-command, from above. And this is what they're used to. It's a very entrenched bureaucracy.

So, these are the political resistances that he's experiencing.

In addition to that, as he moves forward with new thinking and new ideas, he runs into problems both on the economic as well as on the political side.

On the political side, he confronts reactions in those states who are now free to criticize, or at least think they're free to criticize. It's not correct that they're free to criticize. But that's coming home. He can't repress it in the old way because that would be contrary to glasnost.

Then when you have the ethnic problems, as we do in Azerbaijan and Armenia, aggravated by dissatisfactions with the way that the Armenian earthquake was handled, all the displaced people, these add to the question of whether or not this is really worthwhile, from the point of view of the consumer, who's not seeing his lifestyle improve, and the politician, who's questioning the methods.

I haven't even talked about the military problems and coming to grips with what do you do about adjusting military spending.

But those are all on the down side. There are many plus sides that he's doing that are altering the face of national strategy and perspectives.

LEHRER: Is it your feeling that if he were to go tomorrow, that he has set in motion a freight train that cannot be stopped in certain of these reform areas? Or would they go boom the minute he goes boom?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: If he goes boom tomorrow, I think the odds...

LEHRER: That's an overstatement. Right.

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Well, I think time frame has something to do with this. He has many supporters -- Shevardnadze, for instance; there are others -- who could carry on the program. But he has -- at this stage, I would say, if I were a betting man, that the Soviets would probably quickly return, as quickly as they could, to old ways.

But every day that he survives, every new program he's able to put in place, every change in the political structure that gives him the ability to do it and to around the bureaucracy improves the likelihood of more permanence to those programs.

LEHRER: You said that Gorbachev is no ordinary man. Robin MacNeil interviewed George Kennan recently and he asked Kennan, "How did that system produce such a remarkable man?" And Kennan said, "That's the great mystery."

Is it a mystery to the CIA? What is your all's theory about how he came to be what he is?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: I think there are a thousand opinions on it, and mine's no better than anybody else's.

He brings an unusual level of energy. Now, this is the first time they really dropped down into the younger generation for leadership. He'd been waiting for this opportunity. He knew what he wanted to do, largely what he wanted to do, at least for the near term. There's some question as whether he -- how long his vision is. He knew he wanted to stir the stew. And that's exactly what he's done.

He's an adroit politician and he knew what sinews of power he had to grab in order to make it happen, to keep from being subverted. And he almost lost it a couple of times within the last two years.

LEHRER: Was there a couple of very serious things?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Yeah. The moral is, don't go off on vacations.

LEHRER: Yeah.

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: And...

LEHRER: You mean when he was gone, when he left the country, he got in trouble.

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: When he was gone or on vaca -- there was extended vacation, he was writing his book. Conservative forces were beginning to speak out against his programs. The Ligachevs, the Chebrikovs, and so on, were speaking out.

I think it's probably fair to say that in his last major move to consolidate his power, he did so while the opposition was on vacation.

So the moral is, don't go on vacation in Russia.

4

LEHRER: And the other moral is, some things haven't changed, too.

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: That's true. That's true.

LEHRER: How has Gorbachev, prestroika, glasnost changed the role of the CIA, in what it does for the United States vis-a-vis the Soviet Union?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: For many years, the Soviet target, because it represented the greatest potential threat to our national security, occupied a very significant percentage of our resources.

Then, over time, within the last decade or so, I saw it begin to drop, as regional problems around the world consumed our interest, and policymakers needed more and more information on which to make policy decisions.

With the advent of Gorbachev and perestroika and glasnost come unusual demands. We have a state of not only ferment, dynamism that hasn't existed in the past, changes, initiatives taking place that call for policy, either responses or counter-initiatives.

The glasnost era has introduced enormous amounts of information that was not previously available to us. We monitor some 800 publications in Soviet Russia, which are now discussing labor unrest, other kinds of economic and political problems they wouldn't have been allowed to discuss just a few years ago. And we have to sort through that, as well as the other forms of technical and human intelligence that we work with, to understand what is really true and what they want us to hear that may not be as accurate as the kind of information we try to develop. So, those demands are great.

I haven't even mentioned arms control.

LEHRER: Sure.

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Another major challenge to intelligence. We're going through negotiations: the INF treaty; now we're starting the START treaty. Tremendous new initiatives in terms of on-site inspections, both in their country and in our country. Dealing with that is a compelling responsibility.

Not only do we have that, but -- and I don't know whether you would ask the question. I certainly would want to say that despite all of these detente-type initiatives of Gorbachev, the intelligence-collecting activities of the Soviets has, if anything, increased around the world. And that calls for an increased counterintelligence capability on our part.

LEHRER: Now, how do you figure that? Why would they at the same time do, as you call it, the detente activity, at the same time up their spying?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Well, we are -- we continue to be in a kind of race, a race to stay ahead in technology, race to make sure that our military capabilities, our defensive capabilities are equal and better than theirs. They have the same challenge in dealing with us. So they have an interest in stealing our secrets and knowing our intentions and our capabilities, recruiting assets in order to provide them with that information.

LEHRER: They're still doing that? Business as usual?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Well, business as usual. Maybe more than as usual. They're more careful about how they do it. There's more openness about their intelligence agencies. They're humanizing them, at least in print.

LEHRER: Explain that. What do you mean? Give me an example of that.

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Well, can you imagine a few years ago when the Director of the KGB would allow himself to be interviewed, or would grant an interview with our ambassador for two hours? Not long ago, a previous Director quoted from one of my speeches.

You know, it's a kind of exchange and discussion that's designed, I think, to humanize the KGB. Which is far vaster -- more vast than, in responsibilities, than the Central Intelligence Agency. They have an enormous internal security network, and are feared as a kind of police-state-enforcing agency. And so that may account for some of their activities.

But it's a much easier, looser activity, but it doesn't mean they've stopped working.

LEHRER: Because you're getting more information, it is more readily available to the United States, how has that changed the U.S. as far as looking assets? Meaning people, Russians, to give us secrets, etcetera? Has it changed anything at all along those lines?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Well, I know you don't want me to talk about the details of our collection activity around the world. But it is still important for us to have reliable sources of information in areas that are not being discussed in the public press, matters that are important to the United States to know: sensitive, what we would call classified, information. We're not getting that in the newspapers.

LEHRER: Uh-huh.

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: What we're getting in the newspapers and the magazines is a flavor of what's on the minds of the people, including the dissidents, in Soviet Russia. But it doesn't substitute either for what human intelligence can provide us, or for what our satellites can provide in observing what they're really doing. In all of the peace initiatives, it's very important to our policymakers not only to listen to what is being said, but to watch their feet and see what they are really doing or not doing.

LEHRER: Do your professionals at the CIA feel they have a better fix on these kinds of things now in the Soviet Union than they've ever had before?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Well, I think our collecting capability is far more sophisticated, particularly our national technical collection. Some of the same traditions of human collection, clandestine services, is the same but getting better. Those things are relative to the challenges. And the changes that are taking place in Soviet Russia, the changes in approach to not only that, but to military defense activities, require our staying up to speed.

We have to develop new and better techniques to monitor activities that become the subject of treaties. Mobile missiles, for example. We didn't have mobile missiles a few years ago. A new challenge. How do we know where they are? How will we recognize them when they've been camouflaged?

I don't like to use the word game, but they take defensive measures, denials and deceptions; and we do too. We want to deny them information that we don't want them to have. They want to deny us information that they don't want us to have. And therein is the challenge of an effective intelligence collection agency.

LEHRER: But you take a question, like the first question I asked you about Gorbachev, what his staying power is. In the past, either privately or publicly, CIA and all other officials of the U.S. Government were reluctant to be very specific about anything as far as the Soviet leadership was concerned, that there was so little that was known about what was going on in the Kremlin and the Politburo, etcetera.

Has Gorbachev changed that? Is there more knowledge about the leadership than there has ever been?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Well, there's certainly more knowledge about the individuals, more ways in which we can understand

the people that we're dealing with. There are still mysteries in the Politburo, for example, but we're getting a better picture.

I don't want to give the impression that all of the intelligence collecting is out on the fringes around the world. We have thousands of scholars, analysts, who are taking small bits and pieces of information and making it meaningful to the policymakers of this country who have to make the decisions for us.

LEHRER: I bet for some of them this must seem like a bonanza, though, for new information on the Soviet Union.

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Well, that's right. But at the same time, it's -- you've got to be sure that you've separated the garbage from the important information, and be able to retrieve the information you thought was garbage when it becomes apparent that it was important later on.

LEHRER: As head of the CIA now, you are suddenly working for a man, the President, who's held the job before. How's that change -- has it changed your life in any way? Has it changed the job in any way for you?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Well, I think it's too early to predict what changes are taking place. We had a great deal of support from President Reagan, particularly in growing, support for a growth of intelligence capability. We're now dealing in an area where we're not looking for a lot of growth, because of budgetary constraints, but we're looking for the most effective use of our resources.

And this President, as you say, has had experience in intelligence. He understands it, he believes in it. He wants to keep it away from policymaking, but he wants to use it as the foundation for good policy decision-making.

So, he's interested and reactive. And I find it fun to work for him, just as it was a privilege to work for President Reagan.

LEHRER: Are you still briefing him every day, when he's here?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: The agency is briefing him every day, just as he was briefed when he was Vice President. And I go when it's appropriate. I was there this morning. And it's on -- he's very good at taking in the information, asking the useful questions, and making sure that we are tasked to keep him up to speed in the areas of interest to him.

LEHRER: I know -- I'm not going to ask you, and I know you wouldn't tell me if I did, and specifics. But what is the nature of that briefing? Is it what's happened in the world the last 24 hours, or where there are little troubles that may have popped up in the last 24 hours? What's the nature of the briefing?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Well, I don't think I should discuss the details of the briefing. It's a highly classified briefing. The National Security Adviser and his deputy and the Chief of Staff have been present for these briefings.

They are designed to give him that information that we think he needs to know currently on a wide range of subjects, depending on what we think he needs to know.

LEHRER: You choose the subjects, though.

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: We choose the subjects. Perhaps the subjects command the disclosure, but we choose the subjects.

LEHRER: Yeah.

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: If he wants more, he gets it. If he asks for something, he gets a response. If it wasn't covered, we supply it.

LEHRER: Are you comfortable with his stated position that he does not want the CIA, or he does not want intelligence involved in policy as much as it has been in the past, as you've said?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: I am very comfortable with it, and I have been every since I came over to the CIA almost two years ago. That's been my view of it. I think you can't put a wall between them and have us running off developing intelligence on a subject we're interested in, when the policymakers are concerned with something else. There's got to be an interlink.

But we have to present our national estimates -- and these are estimates that go beyond what's going to happen tomorrow. It's looking down the road and projecting our best assessments of particular problems. We have to do those in a way that they are seen to be objective.

And so, by pulling away from being part of the argument and not being an advocate for a particular policy, it lends more credibility to the integrity of our work product. We have no ax to grind. We tell it like it is: Here it is. You decide which way you want to go.



LEHRER: You're not going to -- are you concerned about your not being a member of the Cabinet? Which is another thing of his.

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: When I came over, I asked President Reagan to not serve as a member of the Cabinet. I have never served as a member of the Cabinet. I'm invited to Cabinet meetings where national security issues are discussed. But I have no problems. I participate in the National Security Council meetings. I have access to the President. I meet regularly with each of the policymakers -- Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, and the National Security Adviser -- separately, and spend time with them making sure that our intelligence is serving them, and briefing them on matters that they need to have more direct awareness of.

And I think that's my job, not to try to make them do something or not do something.

If there's a problem, I point out the problem. And in National Security Council meetings, I make sure that our intelligence is heard.

LEHRER: What is your current attitude about, or what is the CIA's attitude about covert action and where it fits into the role now, in the current climate and this new President?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Well, I'm glad you waited to ask that question till now, because many people think that's all we do. It represents about three percent of our resources.

I think it's important that the United States have a covert action capability. Covert action to implement covertly, secretly, the foreign policy of this country, the overt foreign policy. Not to have a separate CIA foreign policy, but to support what the President and his national security advisers have determined is the policy of this country.

We do it through a very structured, disciplined approach, in which I require a covert action review committee to scrub the proposals, which are usually...

LEHRER: Scrub the proposals.

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: To examine them, test them, as the package comes forward, to be sure that they are -- not only they can be done and they have some hope of success, but that they are lawful, under our laws, that they're consistent with our foreign policy. And I ask them to think about, "Now, if this becomes public," as so many do, "will it make sense to the American people?"

And then when it goes forward to the National Security Council for processing, the same kinds of questions are vetted. The Secretary of Defense is sitting there, Treasury -- rather, State, Attorney General, can tell the President exactly what they think about the proposed finding -- because that's what it's called, an authorization to do this.

And after it's been approved by the President, we take it to the two special committees, the Select Committees of the Senate and the House on Intelligence, and disclose to them what we propose to do and what the President has authorized us to do.

So, there is a -- while there may not be total agreement in the Hill, or maybe even in the President's Cabinet, it's a process by which it is better managed and mistakes are more likely to be eliminated, and if it's a bad plan it's apt to be rejected.

And so, I think that's the way we control secrecy in this country: Ultimately telling the elected representatives of the American people, through the surrogate committees, what it is we're doing.

That's a long-winded way of talking about covert action. But when you think about the Iran-Contra circumstance, do not think about covert action in that way. That was action taken out of an organization that wasn't designated to conduct covert action.

LEHRER: Are you satisfied when you go home from work now every day that there are no -- I ask this question in light of Iran-Contra and the Church Committee hearings and hundreds of spy novels that have been out on this subject. Are you satisfied that there are no rogue agents, no rogue activities going on in the CIA that you don't know about, that somebody's doing and say, "Well, let's don't tell Webster. Let's protect him so he can deny it"? All that kind of -- you know how that runs. Do you feel that you have that control of the agency and you know what's going on?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: I have great confidence that these programs are being run according to the guidelines that have been given to the people who have to run them. I have great confidence in the people who have the responsibility for managing those programs and reporting to me.

I appointed the Deputy Director for Operations, brought him back, respected by traditional officers and respected by me and others who are not traditional officers. I have preached again and again the importance of not being surprised. And I do not accept plausible deniability for individuals, either me or the President. Plausible deniability for a country, yes, because

there are reasons for that. But I'd rather know than be protected by not knowing. Or I would -- and they know that the -- I can't vouch that every operation will go exactly according to Hoyle or that someone won't make a mistake.

But I am sure that we are dealing with dedicated men and women who are anxious to comply with the rules, as they understand them. We've made the rules just as clear as we can. And we support them. They're operating in hostile environments. They have to have some discretion. But they do not have discretion to cross the rule line. As long as they're inside the rule line, I'll defend them to the Congress or to anyone else, because they're doing what is expected of them.

LEHRER: On the other side of this, during the time between -- between the time President Bush was elected and the time he asked you to stay on as head of the CIA, there were a couple of stories, particularly in the Washington Post, that said that some former and present members of the clandestine service of the CIA were lobbying for you not to be asked to stay on, because you had set too many rules and regulations on the clandestine service and all of that, and you were too cautious in this area.

What was that all about?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Well, I really don't know. I'm glad it's behind me. I read the same articles that you did. In a time of transition, there are always people that hope for someone else or have other ideas.

I do know that I have not put impossible rules in place, and they've been put in place with the support, and often the drafting, of senior managers who are interested in protecting our men and women.

A rule that protects our men and women from having to skirt around questions, difficult questions, in testimony before Congress is not a restrictive rule. It authorizes them to not answer the question and say they have an answer, but they're not authorized to give it, and come back and let me argue the case for them. That's not a rule that inhibits them.

LEHRER: I'm sorry. I didn't understand that. This is a rule that allows a CIA employee to refuse to answer a question from...

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: It's instructions on how to deal with questions in hearings that imperil sources and methods. And instead of, as was supposed to have been the case in the past, of trying to dance around questions, perhaps be disingenuous, to

avoid answering them, I simply say, "Tell them you're not authorized to answer. Tell them you'll come back and discuss it with your superiors, and give a quick response to them. And sometimes I'm the one that has to take the case to the committee chairman.

But we're developing a reputation for truthfulness in the Congress. Truthfulness breeds trust. And trust is the essence of our ability to do the things we need to do. In other words, to be allowed to do covert action aggressively, as long as we do it according to the ways that have been set out and have been approved.

LEHRER: Do you trust the Congress now to keep your secrets?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: I trust the two committees, and I trust most of the rest of the Congress. But I've been here too long not to know that things leak. They don't leak just on the Hill, they leak in the White House and they leak in the departments that we work with. And there -- I read a leak on the front page of the paper yesterday, and it's for a reason I don't understand.

So, I don't...

LEHRER: Which one was that?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Well, it was the one about Mexico and the letter from President Salinas.

LEHRER: Oh, right. Right.

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Yes, I trust the leaders who are responsible for the protection of sources and methods. I do know that there is -- with all the staff and with all the individuals who sometimes talk -- don't realize when they're saying something they're giving away something important.

You know, something as simple as using the fact of an intercept to justify an action taken may disclose the fact that that -- that intercept may have been encrypted.

LEHRER: You mean a wiretap or through a satellite, an electronic...

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Yes.

LEHRER: Any kind of...

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Just to say, "Well, we have an intercept in which so-and-so said this." Now, if that were an

encrypted message, that person unwittingly gave away the fact that we had broken a code. And the code's gone. And it takes years to do that.

So, there are little things that I think were not malicious, but were careless. And so we work to build up an understanding of how perishable our sources and methods are. Particularly, we need to protect our live sources, people, or we'll not -- if we don't have that reputation, we're not going to be able to recruit live sources.

LEHRER: Finally, a personal question. How have you found the world different, in terms of running the FBI, as you did for several years, now running the CIA?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Well, I don't suppose the world's changed very much. Some of my responsibilities have changed. I have a much better understanding of the kinds of things around the world that impact upon the quality of our life and our safety and security in this country, a much -- I was responsible for all the foreign counterintelligence in the United States, and I had a high appreciation for it. But I have a new awareness, a more sensitive awareness of the great importance that an agency that collects and analyzes and produces finished intelligence has to the policymakers of this country, our leaders, who have to depend on us to gather that information in a timely, useful and objective way, so that they make the right choices for our country. It's extremely important.

You hear only about our failures. We cannot talk about our successes. I've seen a lot of tremendously important work done by very brave and dedicated and brilliant men and women, scientists, linguists, clandestine operators, the whole range of talents.

And in a society that is open, the challenge to deliver on our mission in a secret way is quite a challenge. And I have the greatest admiration for the men and women who are willing to take the hits, and still keep the secrets of their successes.

LEHRER: Do you enjoy the job?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Of course I enjoy the job.

LEHRER: More so than the FBI?

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Oh, no. You know,...

LEHRER: Oh, I know. I'm not going to...

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: ...I've liked everything I've ever done. I feel privileged to have been in both organizations.

And you know, one of the nice things I look back over the last 10 or 11 years, when I first came here, Stan Turner was the Director of Central Intelligence. We had been classmates at Amherst. And we decided that we had to demonstrate the desire for the two agencies to work together. It hadn't always been the case. And so in our personal relationship, in our meetings and in our work, we set out to do that.

When Bill Casey came along, we agreed to do the same thing.

And I think what people in both agencies would say that there's never been a time when the FBI and the Central Intelligence Agency have worked better together. And I feel very good about that.

LEHRER: All right.

Mr. Webster, thank you very much for being with us.

DIRECTOR WEBSTER: Thank you, Jim.