

A Comprehensive Commentary

An Interview With Director of Central Intelligence George J. Tenet (S)

The end of the Cold War, the revolutions in information technology and military affairs, and changes in American national security policy and concerns: such issues, along with the day-to-day responsibility of leading the CIA and the Intelligence Community, accounting for their operations, and planning for their future, make for a full set of responsibilities for the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI). On 23 June 1998, Brian Latell, Director of the Center for Study of Intelligence and Chairman of the Editorial Board of Studies in Intelligence, accompanied by Studies Editorial Board members Peter Clement, William Nolte, Barry G. Royden, and L. Britt Snider, discussed these and other issues with DCI Tenet. (U)

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of information—millions of pages of previously classified information. And we will continue to do so, within a rational framework, all the while protecting sources and methods. (S)

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The interesting thing is that the American people appreciate our openness, but at the same time the American people also understand what a secret intelligence organization is all about. I do not think anyone is clamoring to come in take all our secrets and toss them into the street. If there were such a clamor, we could not do that. We have done a good job here. The balance is about right. We are not trying to hide behind anything. But do not put me in the position of saying whether this is more important than our core mission. That is not a choice I will make. (S)

There is, by the way, no separate pot of money someone has made available to me to pursue declassification and historical efforts, independent of the resources required to pursue the primary mission of the Agency. That said, we are leaning forward. How many Russian estimates have we declassified? Approximately 500. We have put out an enormous amount

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What about the idea that the DCI should be appointed for a term, say of five or 10 years? (U)

At one point, I did not favor that. But I now believe—and I do not say this from the point of view of my own job security—the time has come to consider a term for the DCI so there is some stability in this organization and in the Community. I do not believe anyone could serve for 10 years. I would be dead before 10 years. The job is too hard for that. But it is time to think about something like a six-year term that would allow a DCI to straddle administrations, make sure he or she had made an adequate transition, and to ensure stability.

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We do espionage. That is the nature of what we do. We steal secrets....
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Another unsanitized phrase. (U)

I cannot explain what we do here other than to say we steal secrets for a living and we take those secrets and put them into all-source products that make a difference to somebody. If anybody thinks we are doing anything else here, they can come talk to me. But let's be blunt about what we do. There is no dishonor in it. We steal secrets for a living. If we do not steal secrets for a living, then we ought to shut the doors and do something else for a living. That is at the core, along with the analytic arm of this agency, with why we were put in business. They are the equal of each other. There can be no skewing toward one or the other. They are both the sharp end of the spear of the intelligence business. I do not know how else to tell people what we do. (U)

We're almost out of time. Have there been aspects of this job that have surprised you? (U)

No. What is different about this job is the importance you have to place on leading and caring for people. It is the most pleasurable part of the job. You cannot lead this organization and not be struck by the great talent that is here, the great enthusiasm that is here, the great will to work. The work ethic here is enormously high, and I am continuously struck by that. I am struck by how much people care about what they do and how much they care about this Agency. How much they care about each other. It is a big bureaucracy, you know, and nothing is 100 percent, but the truth is that what hits you as Director of Central Intelligence is that you lead and are partners with men and women who care deeply about the mission and about protecting this country. I am

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constantly struck by that, and by our diversity. By the different kinds of people we have working here and by how much they care about what they do. (U)

The most pleasurable part of the job is to meet all these people, either overseas or here. It is so important for a DCI to be aware of that. You get wrapped up in issues and process. You can get trapped on the 7th floor and never walk off the inner corridor of that floor. If you live like that, you do yourself a great disservice, because you do not quite get what you are here for. (U)

As DCI, you are not supposed to be the smartest person in Washington. You are not supposed to be the greatest operator in the world or the greatest analyst. You *are* supposed to be able to lead men and women who will do their jobs well, if you give them the opportunity to do it. (U)

It has been wonderful—for me and my family. We love what we do. And my wife is an equal here because she has gotten quite involved in family issues, caring for people overseas. Do their household goods arrive on time? Are the kids taken care of with school and so on? Are we taking care of our families? That is the kind of organization I want to work in. Most of the other organizations I have worked in have been relatively cold and detached about that kind of issue. (U)

The people here have been the great revelation. I have made friendships that will last the rest of my life. It is easy to become very fond of this place. I am an undying advocate of what we do. Because you see what people do and what they sacrifice. (U)

Thank you.