

## COMMENTARY

David Gries

There are only two additions and one comment I can usefully add to Jim McCullough's vivid, evenhanded description of the events that overwhelmed CIA's seventh floor during November and December 1986 ("Personal Reflections on Bill Casey's Last Month at CIA," by James McCullough; *Studies in Intelligence*, summer 1995). I do want to record, however, that with customary modesty McCullough fails to note his own steadying influence as a voice of reason and common sense during those troubled months.

The first addition concerns the atmosphere on the seventh floor during the last 10 days of November 1986. As McCullough relates, 19-21 November was occupied with preparing Casey's first Congressional testimony scheduled for 21 November. The meeting to discuss the testimony held late on the afternoon of 20 November was characteristic of the confusion that gripped the seventh floor during that period. Although all the seats were taken around Casey's ample conference table, no one present was able—or perhaps willing—to fit together all elements of the Iran-Contra puzzle.

In fact, the atmosphere at the meeting was surreal: many of the participants seemingly were more interested in protecting themselves than in assisting Casey, who was visibly exhausted and at times incoherent. It was clear to McCullough and me that the next morning we would be accompanying a badly confused Director to Congress. We both felt that we had let the

boss down, that he was headed for trouble, and that we had not done enough to prepare him.

The second addition concerns Casey's condition when, on 10 December, McCullough and I again accompanied him to Congress, on this occasion to the cavernous hearing room of the House International Relations Committee. It was at this hearing, described in McCullough's article, that I first began to realize that Casey was ill, perhaps very ill. Something was clearly wrong with his motor control, to the extent that he lurched from side to side in his chair, while we took turns trying to keep the microphone within range of what by then was a barely audible mumble.

When late in the hearing Casey asked for a break, it took four of us—two security officers, McCullough, and myself—to steer him, stumbling repeatedly, up the risers to the back of the hearing room, down a flight of steps, and along a narrow corridor to his destination. The return trip was equally perilous. Not long afterward, Chairman Dante Fascell, recognizing that his witness was in no condition to continue, adjourned the hearing.

The hearing was, as McCullough writes, "another dismal performance." It was also the beginning of a tragedy, a larger-than-life man destroyed by a small tumor, just at the time when he needed all his powers to defend himself from questionable charges that he was the mastermind behind the Reagan administration's worst foreign policy disaster. After his death—after

the opportunity for rebuttal that died with him—the charges grew in scope and detail, their creators safe from Casey's reach.

Next, I would like to comment on the role of excessive secrecy in first creating and then deepening public suspicion of CIA involvement in the Iran-Contra affair, an ill-advised effort that was devised, managed, and bungled by the staff of the National Security Council with support around the margins from CIA, NSA, and the Pentagon.

The essence of secrecy is compartmentation. Applied horizontally across CIA's organizational structure, compartmentation helps keep the secrets, a necessary goal in any intelligence agency. But in the Iran-Contra affair, compartmentation was also applied vertically inside CIA's chain of command. Thus, McCullough's remark that, in October 1986, he "became aware for the first time of the general outline of the NSC Staff's management of and CIA's support for the administration's efforts to trade arms for hostages."

McCullough was not alone. Many of the officers working directly for Bill Casey knew little or nothing of these events until long after they had occurred. Casey's General Counsel was unaware until after the event of the November 1985 use of a CIA proprietary aircraft to ferry missiles to Iran. The officers charged with meeting the press and with representing CIA to Congress (including myself) were operating in near-total ignorance

until Clair George briefed Congressional staffers on 18 November 1986.

Further, vertical compartmentation impeded and, in some cases, defeated efforts not only to put all the facts on the table in preparation for the Congressional hearings McCullough describes, but also to provide documents, first to Congress and later to the Independent Counsel as he pursued his investigation. McCullough writes that knowledge of CIA's role was "scattered around the DO." The description is too kind. In fact, it required months to pull the scattered pieces together into an accurate account and years to provide complete documentary evidence to investigating authorities.

I recall vividly the frustration felt by members of the Executive Director's Iran-Contra review committee, as we were told with numbing regularity that excessive compartmentation made it nearly impossible to reconstruct events and locate relevant documents. In the end, these failings led much of the public to an inaccurate, but understandable, conclusion. CIA was deeply involved in the affair, and Bill Casey was its mastermind.

What lessons does the Iran-Contra affair teach? First, vertical compartmentation is a sure prescription for trouble whenever officers are called to account for actions about which they have incomplete knowledge. In the Iran-Contra affair, probably only one officer positioned three levels down from the Director's office had complete or nearly complete knowledge. Casey's loose management style and his contempt for the chain of

command were partly to blame for permitting this to happen. Misleading testimony to Congress and inaccurate briefings of the press were among the consequences.

Second, prudent management of a high-risk operation, especially one in which another government organization is calling the shots, is impossible without making accurate information available to a circle wide enough to permit debate of different courses of action. In the Iran-Contra affair, vigorous debate on the seventh floor might have mitigated the most damaging mistakes, such as mishandling Presidential Findings.

Third, vertical compartmentation must not be a shield to conceal poor judgment or provide protection from accountability, as was the case in two Central American stations, where violations of Congressional prohibitions against supplying the Contras continued without knowledge of officers at higher levels in the chain of command. Although I now look at CIA from the outside rather than from the inside and thus often lack relevant information, my impressions of some of CIA's recent troubles is that many of the lessons of the Iran-Contra affair have not been learned.

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