

CHAPTER 5

REAGAN AND BUSH - A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

The 12-year period from 1980 to 1992 presented CIA with two presidents who were virtual polar opposites in terms of their familiarity with and use of intelligence. Governor Ronald Reagan of California had the least experience as a regular consumer of national-level intelligence of any president elected since CIA was founded; Ambassador George H. W. Bush, on the other hand, was completely familiar and comfortable with intelligence in a way that only a former DCI could be. Reagan brought to the presidency deep convictions about key national security issues and felt the need for only limited, very general intelligence information. Bush approached developments abroad as a pragmatic activist and expected from the Intelligence Community an unprecedented level of day-to-day support and detail. Both, however, received Agency officers warmly and were openly appreciative of their support.

Before the election, candidate Reagan received only one intelligence briefing. It was held on 4 October 1980 at Wexford, a borrowed country estate near Middleburg, Virginia, where the governor was staying for a period during the campaign. The DCI, Adm. Stansfield Turner, accompanied by three senior Agency officers, represented CIA. Reagan was accompanied by vice-presidential candidate George Bush; his transition chief of staff Ed Meese; campaign director William Casey; and Richard Allen, his adviser on national security matters.

Participants in that first briefing remember it as a “circus.” The living room of the Middleburg home where the session was held was like a chaotic movie set with chairs scattered more or less randomly about the room and people constantly coming and going. The governor was an engaging host, but in the impossible setting it was extraordinarily difficult to make effective use of the briefing aids and other materials that Turner had brought with him. Throughout the meeting, which went on for approximately one hour, the CIA participants had the feeling that the Reagan camp had accepted the briefing simply because it had been offered and they had to do it. There was no evidence that anyone had the expectation that the governor would engage in an in-depth review of the substantive issues.

Even in these awkward circumstances there was some serious discussion of developments in the Middle East, the agreed focus of the session. Turner discussed the petroleum aspects of the issue and the conflicts between Iran and Iraq and in Afghanistan. National Intelligence Officer for the Middle East Robert Ames briefed on the internal politics of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Richard Lehman, from the National Intelligence Council, elaborated on the impact of the Iran-Iraq war on the region and on the Soviet role.

Reagan posed a few questions to be sure that he understood the essential points the Agency was trying to make. He asked straightforward, common sense questions, primarily related to the oil situation. Agency participants were interested to observe that there was absolutely nothing ideological in the governor's approach and that no policy issues arose.

Richard Allen asked the most questions, including some related to Afghanistan that put the DCI on the spot. In replying to a direct question from Allen about whether the US government was engaged in supplying arms to the insurgents in Afghanistan, Turner felt obliged to be more elliptical than he would have preferred. The DCI left no doubt in the listeners' minds that the United States was supporting the insurgents through Pakistan, but he also tried to make clear that this was a very sensitive covert action program that he was not in a position to describe in detail, inasmuch as the governor was still a candidate for the presidency rather than president-elect.

In recalling his exchange with Reagan in 1993, Turner commented that his reticence on the Afghan program had a serious substantive aspect as well. In early October 1980, the "Afghan story had not yet leaked and we were scared about Pakistan's position."¹ Turner's concerns reflected the fact that, particularly during the early years of the Afghan conflict, the US government was concerned lest Pakistan become the ultimate casualty of a US program, undertaken with vital Pakistani cooperation, to expel Soviet forces from Afghanistan. This concern for security had to be weighed against Turner's larger motive in providing as much information as possible to Reagan "because we didn't want him saying something he would regret if he became president."

The press had been informed in advance that Reagan would receive an intelligence briefing on the Middle East on 4 October. Reporters were eagerly awaiting the candidate's reaction, knowing the briefing was potentially politically significant inasmuch as Reagan had previously criticized the Carter administration for its failure to have done more to support the late shah of Iran. In fact, after the briefing, Reagan left it to Bush to discuss the session with the

¹ Stansfield Turner, interview by the author in McLean, Virginia, 20 April 1993. Subsequent quotations from Turner also come from this interview.

press. The latter called the discussion “pure intelligence and said that neither he nor Mr. Reagan intended to use the information as ammunition to criticize President Carter.”² Bush added that he was “impressed” with the information. “I feel better informed about the world,” he told reporters, “I can’t tell you I feel more optimistic about it.” For his part, Reagan declined to discuss the briefing with newsmen, although he did characterize it as “most interesting.”

The one presidential debate held during the 1980 campaign that involved the candidates of the major parties was held in Cleveland, Ohio, on 28 October, some three weeks after Reagan’s intelligence briefing. At least half of the 90-minute debate was devoted to developments abroad and US national security policy. The international portion of the debate was largely a discussion of Middle East issues: Arab-Israeli peace negotiations; Persian Gulf oil; the terrorist threat, specifically that from Iran related to the ongoing hostage crisis; the Iran-Iraq war; and weapons proliferation. Agency officers were relieved that during this extended discussion there was, unlike the situation four years earlier in 1976, no mention whatever of CIA.

In response to a question from the moderator of the debate on what he might do to deal with terrorism, Reagan made clear that he did not want to “say anything that would inadvertently delay in any way the return of those hostages” and that he was fearful he might “say something that was presently under way or in negotiation and thus expose it and endanger the hostages.” He also made clear that he did not have “access to the information in which I would know all the options that are open.”³ Senior Agency officers were not surprised that the governor would handle the hostage issue this way during the debate; they had been struck—and remembered their reaction clearly in 1993—that there had been no discussion whatever of the hostage issue during their briefing of the candidate two weeks earlier.

Ironically, in light of the highly charged politics of the hostage issue that would ensue in succeeding years, the only discussion of the issue that occurred during CIA’s formal briefings in the preelection period in 1980 occurred not with Reagan but with third-party candidate John Anderson. On Sunday afternoon, 5 October, Turner and three senior Agency officers spent two hours providing Anderson the same briefing on the Middle East that had been given to Reagan the previous day. In 1993, Turner recounted that on that occasion Anderson reported to him that he had been approached by an Iranian intermediary who raised the possibility of an arms-for-hostages exchange with Iran. The DCI promptly reported this approach to the State Department and took no further action himself.

² *New York Times*, 5 October 1980, 34.

³ *Ibid.*, 29 October 1980, A27.

Those involved in the briefing of Anderson recall it as a deeply substantive and intellectual discussion that went on without interruption for more than two hours. Anderson impressed the Agency officers with a number of perceptive and informed questions. Turner recalled vividly the contrast between the Reagan and Anderson briefings, saying that he received “more sensible questions from Anderson than we got from the Reagan people.”

Postelection Briefings

In response to the Agency’s standing invitation, Reagan aide Ed Meese telephoned Turner some two weeks following the November election to arrange for intelligence support for the new president-elect. Although Reagan himself was to divide his time between Washington and California, his transition staff had set up offices in Washington, and it was decided that the director’s follow-on briefings should be given in the capital. As the scheduling worked out, these sessions occurred on 19 and 20 November at the townhouse Reagan used as his headquarters on Jackson Place, near the White House. Briefings were also provided on 11 December and 15 January at Blair House, the much larger and more elaborate presidential guest house across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House.

It was decided to devote the first of the postelection briefings to an update on the Middle East, inasmuch as it had been more than six weeks since the last meeting with Reagan in early October. In his opening remarks Turner described the structure and functions of the various elements of the US Intelligence Community. He then turned the floor over to the Agency’s assistant NIO for the Middle East, Martha Neff Kessler, who did the bulk of the substantive briefing.

Thinking back on the session in 1993, Kessler remembered primarily how Turner, Lehman, and she were invited to join the president-elect and his staff around the dining room table of the Jackson Place townhouse but that the room was already so crowded with Reagan aides that it was all but impossible to even sit down. The result was that while Kessler was able literally to rub elbows with Reagan and Bush simultaneously, she was unable to open the briefing book. She gave a more spontaneous and informal briefing than might otherwise have been the case.

In contrast to the briefing provided six weeks earlier, Kessler recalled that, in late November, Reagan was an active participant who posed a number of questions regarding Middle East peace issues. He focused on the Golan Heights, Syrian and Palestinian politics, and relations among the various Middle East countries. According to Kessler, Reagan’s questions “reflected considerable



President Ronald Reagan talks with veteran CIA analyst Peter Dixon Davis.

knowledge. He was by no means a rightwing ideologue as the press charged. He was very current and extremely alert.”⁴ Allen also asked a number of questions, and his often had an edge. Bush, who had been instrumental in setting up these sessions, made a number of comments elaborating on CIA activities.

Participants in the briefing on 19 November remember it as one of the more notable cases when an analytic prediction provided to a president came true. In the course of her discussion of the high stakes of the ongoing Middle East negotiations, Kessler remarked, “We could lose Sadat.” Reagan interrupted, “What do you mean, lose Sadat?” to which Kessler replied that he could be overthrown or killed. Her concerns were based on her assessment of the tensions in the region rather than on any specific intelligence reporting. Tragically, this premonition was to come to pass less than a year later, in October 1981.

The session held the following day, 20 November, also took place in the crowded Jackson Place townhouse. It was to have been a review of the US-Soviet strategic force balance, the NATO–Warsaw Pact conventional force

⁴ Martha Neff Kessler, interview by the author in McLean, Virginia, 30 March 1993.

balance, the Soviet threat to Poland, and developments in Central America. In fact, no systematic briefing occurred at all. Instead, there was a general and relatively brief discussion of the Soviet threat to Poland and the situation in Central America.

Reagan's expressed interests during the session on 20 November included the relationship between the Soviets' involvement in Eastern Europe and their ability to pursue their interests in other parts of the world. He was well informed on Mexico's role in Central America, Cuba, and the region, attributing this to his California background. Concerning both Central America and Eastern Europe, the president-elect's comments often addressed the policy aspects of what the United States was doing and should do. Obligated to demur on the policy questions, the CIA briefers came away concerned about whether they had been very helpful.

By the time of the briefing on 11 December, the Reagan team had relocated its operation to Blair House, which provided a much better setting for an organized presentation. The Agency's primary briefer on that occasion was Douglas Diamond, a specialist on the Soviet economy who had been one of the briefers of President Jimmy Carter in Plains four years earlier. Diamond later recalled that the briefing covered not only the Soviet economy, but also the implications of the economic situation for the USSR's military programs, the US-Soviet strategic balance, and the Sino-Soviet situation. He found Reagan a friendly and interested recipient who raised a number of factual questions. On the other hand, Diamond also remembered in 1993 that "the sun certainly didn't go down on this briefing like it had in Plains."⁵ It was brief, reflecting the dramatically contrasting styles of Reagan and Carter. Participants recall that Turner was careful to provide "a Ronald Reagan-type briefing, not a Carter briefing" in terms of the length and level of generality as well as its emphasis.

The CIA director's briefings of the president-elect during November and December were made somewhat awkward by the running speculation in the media about whether Turner would be replaced and by whom. As the weeks passed, the press more and more frequently suggested that campaign director Casey would be appointed DCI. One attendee at the November briefings recalled that, in these ambiguous circumstances, Turner simply "talked as though he expected to be kept on as DCI."⁶ Another remembered Casey saying to Turner, following one of the November briefings, "You are doing exactly the right thing" in proceeding as if he would stay on as DCI.⁷

⁵ Douglas Diamond, interview by the author in McLean, Virginia, 28 April 1993.

⁶ Lehman interview, 10 March 1993.

⁷ Kessler interview, 30 March 1993.

From the CIA perspective, it was never clear exactly when Reagan and Casey finally decided on the CIA directorship. Within a three-week period in November and December, Casey at first denied to Turner the press stories that he would become DCI; later, before the briefing of 11 December, he telephoned Turner to confirm that indeed the press stories were true. At the conclusion of the session on 11 December, Reagan informed Turner that the Casey nomination would be announced in a matter of hours.

Thinking back on the politics of the briefings and the CIA directorship in 1993, Reagan recalled, "My memory is of being completely satisfied with the briefings I received during the transition." But he also made clear that his satisfaction with the briefings had not for a moment led him to consider leaving the incumbent CIA director in place. Reagan recalled emphatically, "I disagreed so completely with everything that President Carter was doing that we thought a change was needed."⁸

In discussing the more general question of how CIA had kept him aware of Agency programs, Reagan noted that he had always thought he received sufficiently detailed information on CIA's activities. Specifically, he expressed appreciation for a briefing Turner provided the week before the inauguration on the Agency's sensitive technical and human-source collection efforts and on some covert action programs. That briefing, conducted on 15 January, was a particularly important one because it came at a time when the Reagan team had been criticizing the outgoing Carter administration for its inaction in countering the Soviet threat worldwide. Inevitably, much of this criticism was born of ignorance, because Reagan and his advisers, before the DCI's briefing, were unaware of the array of covert action and sensitive collection programs in place.

Turner's final briefing was provided only to Reagan, Bush, and Casey—by then DCI-designate—unlike the previous sessions that were attended by a large number of aides. The director described seven different covert action programs and a dozen sensitive collection undertakings. One of Turner's assistants later recalled hearing at the time that the recipients on that occasion had no idea of the number of programs that were in place and were extremely interested, especially in the Afghan program. Interestingly, in light of subsequent events, none of the participants in any of the formal, high-level briefings of Reagan during the transition remembers any discussion of the US hostages in Iran, nor do the classified records of those briefings indicate the issue was raised.

As a result of the briefing on 15 January, Reagan—like Carter, but unlike all other postwar presidents to that time—had a thorough understanding of CIA's

⁸ Ronald Reagan, interview by the author in Los Angeles, California, 26 July 1993. Subsequent quotations from Reagan also come from this interview.



DCI William Casey's close campaign relationship with Ronald Reagan won him close and frequent access to the president.

most sensitive activities at the time he became president. Ironically, Bush was responsible in both cases: he had briefed Carter personally in 1976 and had ensured that he and Reagan received such a briefing in 1981. Bush, with his unique perspective, was struck by the differing reactions of the two presidents. Bush had noticed in 1976 that Carter showed no reaction when he was informed of the Agency's sensitive programs; Reagan, on the other hand, supported them all enthusiastically.⁹

A Higher Level of Daily Support

Initially, it appeared doubtful that during the transition Reagan would accept the Agency's offer of daily intelligence briefings on current developments, as distinct from the more informal and occasional background briefings. The president-elect was known to be apprehensive that the outgoing president and his national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, would use such briefings to "put one over on him" and influence his future policies. In addition, several of

⁹ George H. W. Bush, interview by the author in Kennebunkport, Maine, 6 May 1993. Subsequent quotes from Bush also come from this interview.

Reagan's key advisers doubted that he would learn anything from the briefings that he could not learn just as easily from the newspapers. Fortunately, from CIA's point of view, the vice president-elect was aware of these feelings within the Reagan camp and was determined to counter them. His view was that the president-elect—indeed, any president-elect—badly needed the experience of reading a daily intelligence report with an Agency officer in attendance to supplement and explain the material.

On Friday, 21 November, Reagan finished a week of briefings and meetings in Washington and departed for his home in Pacific Palisades, California. Bush rode with Reagan to the airport sendoff and used the occasion to urge the president-elect to accept daily intelligence briefings during the several weeks he would be in California. His appeal worked. A member of the Reagan staff telephoned from the governor's aircraft to ask that the Agency provide the PDB, beginning the next morning in California. Richard Kerr, who was taking over the transition team from CIA's longtime current intelligence chief, Richard Lehman, boarded a commercial flight to Los Angeles that evening.

Kerr recalls a very warm welcome from Reagan when he appeared at mid-day on the 22nd to present the PDB and a short briefing. Kerr and a colleague, Dixon Davis, shared the duty of providing such briefings from 22 November through 14 January 1981. They were interested that Reagan was almost always alone, or accompanied by a single staff assistant, during the period he was in California. The Reagan transition team was at work in Washington, and the candidate himself had a relatively relaxed and detached schedule. This was in marked contrast to most other transitions before and since.

Reagan proved to be a thorough and very intent reader during the typically 20-minute sessions that he held with the CIA visitors. Always friendly and respectful, he nevertheless displayed a certain wariness regarding the intelligence material that the briefers interpreted as reflecting his lack of familiarity with it. Mrs. Reagan was almost always present in the home but normally did not join the governor for the daily intelligence briefings. The first day was an exception; on that occasion she hosted a lunch for Kerr. In the weeks that followed, she frequently would pass through the room during the briefing. Mrs. Reagan seemed to have mixed feelings about the process, displaying some uneasiness that she was not privy to what her husband was hearing. The staffers who sometimes sat in on the briefings took no interest in the substance; their only interest was to ensure that the process did not take too much time.

During the last half of November 1980, the international situations that received the most prominent coverage in the press included the hostage crisis with Iran, the future of strategic arms talks with the Soviet Union, and domestic political developments in Israel and Poland—the latter including the ques-

tion of possible Soviet meddling or intervention. The same issues were treated at length in the PDB, and the president-elect was an avid reader on all subjects. He also read very carefully the background pieces the briefers provided him. These supplementary papers, normally two pages long, were published on a regular basis to bring him up to date on trouble spots around the world. Within the first two weeks Reagan read backgrounders on the situations in Pakistan, Lebanon, Kampuchea, Morocco, the Philippines, and Somalia.

Taking into account the PDB, the accompanying oral briefings and the supplementary material, the intelligence Reagan received each day was significantly greater in volume and detail than that received by Carter during his transition four years earlier. At that time the practice had been simply to make the written PDB available for his perusal.

From late November 1980 until early January 1981, Reagan read a number of current intelligence items relating to the hostage crisis in Iran. These pieces contained no sensitive US operational material. Rather, they kept the president-elect informed of the activities of various Iranian and third-country figures and provided such information as was available on the condition of the hostages and on developments in Iran. Reagan asked many questions about the hostage situation as well as about developments in the Soviet Union, Mexico, and Cuba—countries in which he clearly took a special interest.

In the course of their daily meetings with the president-elect, Kerr and Davis provided considerable information about the US Intelligence Community and its collection programs. This practice, encouraged by Bush, was designed in part simply for the new president's general background knowledge but also to heighten his consciousness about what information should not be discussed publicly lest it jeopardize intelligence sources and methods. In these sessions there was no discussion whatever of CIA's covert action programs. In contrast with the daily briefings provided President-elect Clinton 12 years later, no support was provided directly to Reagan for use in telephone calls with foreign leaders, meetings with his own staff or visitors, or press conferences.

Throughout the briefing process, Reagan displayed some of the understandable impatience that Agency briefers have seen with other presidents-elect over the years. He commented on a number of occasions, for example, on the awkwardness of reading the daily intelligence material, "even though I am not in a position to affect US policy." He clearly was most interested in the items provided him on how foreign leaders and governments were reacting to his election, including their analyses and speculation about policies he would follow. Reagan was entertained by accounts of foreign judgments on his probable behavior and worried by misrepresentations of his positions.¹⁰

There was another side to the president-elect that the Agency briefers found challenging and frustrating. According to Davis, "The problem with Ronald Reagan was that his ideas were all fixed. He knew what he thought about everything—he was an old dog."¹¹ This was particularly apparent regarding issues involving the Palestinians. Reagan, by his own account, carried a decidedly pro-Israel attitude from his Hollywood associations over the years.

In response to comments and questions from Reagan, Agency analysts produced a three- or four-page memorandum on the subtleties of the Palestinian movement. The memorandum discussed the complex array of backgrounds, personalities, ideologies, tactics, and strategies that divided the Palestinian people and characterized the many groups inside and outside the Palestine Liberation Organization. Davis recalled that the president-elect read the memorandum "very slowly and thoughtfully—he must have taken 10 minutes. At the end he said, 'But they are all terrorists, aren't they?'—My heart just sank."¹²

During the 1980 transition, Bush and Allen, who was to become national security advisor, were also provided intelligence support on virtually a daily basis. In addition to playing an immensely important role in establishing the Agency's relationship with Reagan, Bush was a key consumer in his own right. He read the current intelligence publications every day and requested a great deal of additional support for his meetings with foreign leaders. Reagan had delegated to him the task of meeting with or taking most calls from numerous heads of government and foreign ambassadors. In many cases the Agency's supporting material was provided to Bush in person in Washington or in California. In other instances it was provided in Houston, particularly over the Christmas holiday. Bush's substantive interests paralleled Reagan's, with the exception that the vice president-elect had an even deeper interest in the details of any information relating to the hostages in Iran. His questions related primarily to information the Intelligence Community had on their health.

Beginning on 18 November, Allen was briefed daily through the remainder of the transition. He initially attempted to interpose himself between the Agency briefers and the president-elect, on the first occasion insisting that he receive the PDB and take it to Reagan for his reading. Bush's intervention with Reagan ensured that Agency briefers subsequently saw him directly. Allen then received the PDB separately. He also solicited significant additional support from the Agency for his own use and in support of Reagan. It was Allen, for example, who determined the subjects to be addressed in the

¹⁰ Richard Kerr, interview by the author in McLean, Virginia, 9 March 1993.

¹¹ Dixon Davis, interview by the author in Washington, DC, 26 April 1993.

¹² *Ibid.*

first 10 “backgrounders” that were provided to Reagan, and it was he who requested information from the Agency to prepare the president-elect for a meeting with Mexican President José Lopez-Portillo.

The other two key players who were to be on the Reagan national security team, Secretary of State-designate Alexander Haig and Secretary of Defense-designate Caspar Weinberger, did not receive the PDB during the transition. Weinberger had requested PDB delivery as early as mid-December, but it was determined instead that he should receive the less sensitive *National Intelligence Daily* until he was sworn in. In fact, his first briefing with the PDB occurred within minutes of his swearing in as secretary of defense. Haig, too, began receiving PDB briefings on inauguration day.

After the Inauguration

The inauguration of Reagan marked a watershed in the CIA’s relationship with him just as the inauguration of Carter had done four years before. In fact, it was even more decisive. During the transition, intelligence professionals had seen Reagan on a daily basis and had a relatively full discussion of international developments from which they could learn firsthand what his interests and needs were. Following the inauguration, with his staff trying to guard his time, this daily contact was cut off. Intelligence support was provided to the president only indirectly through the national security advisor, except in those cases where the CIA director himself had occasion to meet with the president.

In a meeting with Kerr on 2 January, shortly before inauguration, Allen had reviewed a variety of styles in which the PDB had been published over the years; he was not particularly taken with any of the previous formats. Agency officers had learned by this time to expect such a reaction. With virtually every administration, if the format had not been designed specifically for that president, either the president or his national security advisor would ask that the publication be altered substantially to make it their own.

In this case, change was minimized because Kerr had discussed on several occasions during December and early January the format and composition of the PDB directly with Reagan. On each occasion, he had expressed his complete satisfaction with the length of the PDB, the format in which it was presented, and the level of generality of the pieces included. He claimed to want no changes at all. On 13 January it was agreed by all parties that the PDB would be provided daily to Allen, who would forward it to the president. Additional copies were provided by individual CIA briefers to the vice president, the national security advisor, and the secretaries of defense and state.

Agency officers who provided daily intelligence support to the White House during the Reagan administration remember that his several national security advisors varied markedly in the time and attention they devoted to the PDB. In all cases, however, they received the Agency's briefer every day, read the PDB, and ensured that it was forwarded to the president. Of the group, Adm. John Poindexter was perhaps the least interested in reading the intelligence product.

Thinking back over the eight years of the Reagan administration, the Agency's briefing officer remembered only one or two occasions when the national security advisor took him into the Oval Office to brief the president directly. Unlike Carter, Reagan almost never wrote comments or questions on the PDB. On a day-to-day basis, therefore, the Agency's knowledge of the president's intelligence needs was limited. Such knowledge came only indirectly when Reagan's interests were passed on by the national security advisor or conveyed by the president directly to the CIA director.

Although distribution of the PDB theoretically was strictly controlled, as a practical matter the security of the document eroded during the Reagan years. At various points, several presidential advisers were receiving copies of the PDB. This situation unfortunately led the Agency to be circumspect in the items it included in the publication. This turn of events distressed Reagan's second CIA director, Judge William Webster, and Vice President Bush. Ultimately, the latter would be in a position to solve this problem and did.

The fact that Reagan did not receive daily oral briefings from CIA officers did not mean that he did not receive intelligence information. Indeed, throughout the first few years of his administration, Reagan talked often with CIA Director Casey as well as with his other key national security aides. The president valued receiving information directly from individuals he knew personally and with whom he was comfortable; he preferred informal sessions to the more formal NSC system, which was used only infrequently.

This practice created concern among senior intelligence professionals, who worried that the president was receiving, at best, information that was anecdotal and not necessarily as complete, relevant, or objective as it might have been. But it was a practice that clearly was in keeping with the president's management style and personal preferences. In discussing the way he handled intelligence in 1993, Reagan summed it up by saying that throughout his presidency he thought that "we received all the intelligence we needed to make decisions."

Looking back on his presidency, Reagan acknowledged that he had been aware of the widely publicized strains between Secretary of State George Shultz and Casey but claimed to have had no feeling that whatever tensions

existed between the two men had affected the intelligence he received. He said he had not felt that the intelligence provided by the CIA was in any way politicized, volunteering that the Agency had given him the information he needed and did not tell him what to think.

In discussing Reagan's use of intelligence reporting, Bush noted that the president did indeed receive and read the key analytic pieces, especially the PDB. In Bush's judgment, Reagan was seeing information that was timely and relevant, but it had less impact because it was provided indirectly. Bush observed, "It was too bad that Ronald Reagan only read the intelligence at his leisure after he became president. The real benefit is having the briefer sit there with you."

The Transition to President Bush¹³

From the point of view of the US Intelligence Community, the transition to the Bush presidency in 1988 was undoubtedly the easiest of the eight transitions in which the CIA had been involved. In only two previous cases during the postwar period—Johnson in 1964 and Ford in 1974—had an incumbent vice president moved up to the presidency. Each of those accessions occurred amid unique and extraordinarily trying circumstances that made the intelligence transition difficult. The 1988 turnover, by comparison, was the smoothest in postwar history. It also happened to bring into office the only US president to have served as CIA director.

CIA officers had been pleased when Vice President Bush, even before the Republican convention in August 1988, reassured them that he wanted to continue receiving daily intelligence briefings throughout the campaign and after the election. Bush acknowledged that he would be forced to miss some of the daily briefings but asked that they be provided without fail when he was in Washington. An increased proportion of the meetings would have to be held at his residence rather than at his office, which Bush often bypassed as he traveled in and out of Washington during the campaign. The vice president also made clear to Agency officers that, if he won, he planned to alter the arrange-

¹³ In 1984, presidential candidate Walter Mondale did not receive briefings from the CIA. National Security Advisor Bud McFarlane provided him one overview of developments abroad in Minneapolis during the summer, but Mondale did not seek follow-up sessions with the Agency. Remembering the events of a decade earlier during a discussion in Tokyo in April 1994, Ambassador Mondale joked that he might have come off better in campaign debates and sound bites had he had "more ammunition to work with." He observed that he should have asked for a series of CIA briefings but laughingly conceded that he "never really thought [he] stood much of a chance against Reagan, which probably kept [him] from even thinking about preparing seriously for the presidency!"

ments then in place to provide intelligence support to Reagan. Bush stressed that he wanted to continue his daily sessions with CIA briefers not only during the transition period but also after his inauguration because he considered the personal dialogue was useful. The CIA briever with whom Bush spoke recalled in 1994 that he had suggested that, after the inauguration, the DCI, as the president's chief intelligence adviser, might wish to take over the daily briefings. Bush killed the idea on the spot; he "wanted working-level officers" to do the briefings.¹⁴

The Democratic candidate for president in 1988, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, was offered intelligence support and agreed to receive one briefing on worldwide developments at his home in Brookline, Massachusetts. The briefing was delivered on 22 August by CIA Director William Webster and his deputy, Robert Gates, whose most vivid memory of the occasion involved the difficulty the two had in reaching the Dukakis home. Agency security officers were apparently unaware that the route from the hotel where the CIA officials were staying to the Dukakis residence passed through an area near Fenway Park that was completely congested with vehicles and pedestrians trying to force their way to a makeup baseball game. Gates later remembered with some amusement one moment during which the two were stranded in their car surrounded by the crowd. One irate woman peered into their automobile and, on seeing the distinguished Judge Webster, called out to her accompanying friend, "It's that damn Lloyd Bentsen."¹⁵

Senator Bentsen was not in the car but, as Dukakis's running mate, did attend the briefing. Dukakis had also invited Congressmen Louis Stokes and Lee Hamilton, successive chairmen of the House Intelligence Committee, and his adviser on security matters, Madeleine Albright. When the whole group assembled, there was a peculiar feeling; all of them save one knew each other well from their experience in working together on intelligence matters in the Congress or on the NSC staff. Dukakis was the odd man out.

The governor was attentive as Webster and Gates talked, but he listened with the detached air of someone who was doing it out of a sense of obligation rather than out of any real interest in the substance. After Webster finished an extended one-and-a-quarter-hour presentation on worldwide developments and Gates followed with a 15-minute review of developments in the Soviet Union, Dukakis thanked them but raised no questions. Hamilton and Bentsen posed a few questions that were designed to illuminate matters for the governor but failed to spark his interest. Like the briefings given other presidential candidates in preelection periods, the one for Dukakis was devoted entirely to

¹⁴ Charles Peters, telephone interview by the author, McLean, Virginia, 31 January 1994.

¹⁵ Robert Gates, interview by the author in McLean, Virginia, 12 April 1993.

developments abroad. It did not include a discussion of CIA covert action or sensitive collection programs.

In the presidential debates of 1988, CIA officials were expecting the worst from the time the first question was answered. That question, raised during the debate in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, on 25 September, related to narcotics use in the United States. In his answer, Dukakis charged that the administration of Reagan and Bush had been “dealing with a drug-running Panamanian dictator,” Manuel Noriega. The governor did not specifically mention CIA, one of several US government agencies that had dealt with Noriega, but Bush did.

The vice president replied to Dukakis’s charges by saying, “The other day my opponent was given a briefing by the CIA. I asked for and received the same briefing. I am very careful in public life about dealing with classified information, and what I’m about to say is unclassified.” Bush then went on to explain that seven administrations had dealt with Noriega and it was the Reagan-Bush administration that had “brought this man to justice.” CIA officers worried not about the facts of their activities in Panama, which they believed perfectly defensible, but were concerned that the Agency’s briefings and programs were about to become a political football once again.¹⁶

The Agency was still the focus of much media attention generated by the activist policies of its late director, William Casey. Moreover, in the course of the first debate, the candidates addressed such politically charged issues as arms sales to Iran, policy toward Central America, US-Soviet arms control negotiations, and the future of the Strategic Defense Initiative, “Star Wars.” Bush attacked Dukakis for his alleged failure to support the US military strike on Libya in 1986; Dukakis, in turn, criticized Bush for US policies on Angola. Yet, despite these heated and potentially explosive exchanges, CIA did not become a political issue in that debate or later in the campaign. The second and only other debate between the presidential candidates was held on 13 October in Los Angeles. On that occasion little attention was paid to foreign policy issues, and there was no mention whatever of the Central Intelligence Agency.

In the postelection period, Bush quickly directed the Agency to provide daily briefings to those who would make up his key national security team: Vice President Dan Quayle, Chief of Staff John Sununu, and National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft. The president-elect also checked to make sure that the Agency was making the PDB available to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. William Crowe. Bush wanted all these recipients to be reminded of what information came from sensitive sources and methods so

¹⁶ “Bush and Dukakis, Face to Face on Key Issues,” *Congressional Quarterly*, 1 October 1988, 2743.



President George H.W. Bush meets with CIA briefer Charles Peters (standing) and members of the president's national security team. DCI William Webster is seated on Peters's left.

that they would not inadvertently disclose what was classified. He further directed that he did not want the PDB “floating around”; CIA was to show the PDB to authorized recipients and then take it back—it was to be left with no one. His intent was to tighten control of the document “to ensure that the Agency felt free to include more sensitive material.” Speaking for himself, Bush underscored that he did not want to “get lazy.” The Agency briefer was to appear at 8:15 on his first day in office.¹⁷

During his four years in office, Bush routinely received the Agency briefer every working day, almost always as the first item of business in the morning. Webster attended these sessions regularly while he was DCI; Gates did so less frequently. The president read the PDB carefully and quite often examined some of the raw intelligence reports that elaborated on an article he found interesting in the PDB. Occasionally there would be an extended exchange between the president and the Agency's briefer; more often, the president or the national security advisor would pose a few specific questions. The briefer would answer these on the spot or take them back to the Agency to prepare a more satisfactory oral or written answer the following morning.

¹⁷ Peters interview, 31 January 1994.

This system provided the president direct and timely intelligence support and the CIA intimate knowledge of his interests and needs. The fact that the briefings were held in the early morning was especially helpful because that was when he was most likely to be making and receiving telephone calls to heads of state in Europe. Agency briefers were immediately at hand to respond to any information needed to deal with these calls. Bush was much quicker in his daily routine to use the telephone than his predecessors, not only to contact foreign leaders but also to contact the CIA director for an update on the latest developments.

In discussing the system of daily briefings, Bush observed, after his retirement in 1993, “The real payoff is having the Agency briefer there to follow up. But having too many people around creates a problem—I held it to the national security advisor and sometimes the chief of staff. If the group grows, pretty soon word gets out that ‘He’s considering bombing Bosnia’ or whatever.”

Thinking back on the transition from his eight years as vice president to the four years as president, Bush volunteered that there had been no real changes in his intelligence requirements after he moved up to be chief executive: “The big difference is that you have to make the decisions—that makes you read a lot more carefully.”

On becoming president, Bush had sought no significant alterations in the format or composition of the PDB. He had become comfortable with it over the previous eight years. Looking retrospectively, he judged that the mix of items addressed had been well suited to his needs. He attributed that suitability to the presence of the briefer while he read the material, making the Agency aware that he needed more or less on a given subject. Bush was sensitive to the fact that his national security advisor and chief of staff would occasionally discuss with senior Agency officers the purported need to include more items on a specific subject in the PDB. Referring to the efforts of his aides to determine what was provided in the PDB, Bush offered this decisive judgment: “I felt well supported on the full range of issues. Don’t let anybody else tell you what the president wants or needs in the PDB—ask him.”

CIA’s relationship with Bush was undoubtedly the most productive it had enjoyed with any of the nine presidents it served since the Agency’s founding in 1947. Alone among postwar presidents, he had served as CIA director. Also uniquely, he succeeded to the presidency by election after receiving full intelligence support as vice president. These circumstances were obviously not of the CIA’s making and may never be repeated, but they made the Agency’s job immeasurably easier at the time.

The good relationship was also a result of Bush’s deep personal interest in developments abroad and his experience as a diplomat representing the United

States in Beijing and at the United Nations. More than any other president, he was an experienced consumer of national-level intelligence. Also of critical importance was the fact that he had a highly capable and experienced national security advisor in Brent Scowcroft, who was determined to see that he received good intelligence support.

Bush was candid in telling CIA officers when he thought their analysis might be flawed and equally quick to commend them when they were helpful or identified an approaching key development before he did. There were many such developments because his presidency witnessed the most far-reaching international changes of the postwar period: the collapse of European communism, the reunification of Germany, the disintegration of the USSR and the rollback of Russian imperialism, and the full-scale involvement of the United States in a ground war in the Middle East. On these, and on the lesser issues of Tiananmen Square, Haiti, Bosnia, or Somalia, President Bush was uniquely and extraordinarily well informed.

