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## Intelligence Deficit Disorder

By Reuel Marc Gerecht

*The Central Intelligence Agency cannot be reformed if its supporters and detractors continue to substitute partisan bickering for a genuine examination of the agency's problems.*

"In the last year-and-a-half, more than 300 years of experience has either been pushed out or walked out the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) door in frustration. This has left the agency in free-fall. I have visited these brave and committed women and men in nearly every corner of the globe and urge the new director do so. They deserve maximum support and a clear vision of where their agency is headed."

Quite unintentionally, this press release from Representative Jane Harman (D-Calif.) on the resignation of CIA director Porter Goss is a decent guide to the debilitating problems afflicting the agency's clandestine service. Although the operations directorate has certainly been in free-fall, this condition has very little to do with Mr. Goss's tenure. The CIA is a dispirited organization. It should be: the end of the Cold War removed a sustaining sense of purpose and the broad indulgence of the agency's unenviable record of clandestine-intelligence collection, counterespionage, and analytical forecasting.

### Flawed Myths about the CIA

The nature and exigencies of the Cold War (and the attendant literary fascination with cloak-and-dagger stories that usually bore little resemblance to the truth) successfully camouflaged much of the internal rot. Case officers love to deceive

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themselves and others about their work. Would you want to admit that the most important espionage achievement of the Cold War was to wait inside U.S. embassies and consulates for Soviet officials to walk in and volunteer their information and services? Or would you want to admit today that CIA officers who wait for Pakistani, Jordanian, and Egyptian security officers to give them information are the "front-line" operatives in the war on terror?

Another myth is on the verge of being born. To wit: Porter Goss, the conservative ideologue, greatly politicized the CIA and encouraged or forced several critically important senior officers to leave the agency, thus dispiriting the entire organization.

Implicit in Ms. Harman's commentary—made more explicit elsewhere by her, by other Democrats in Congress, and by sympathetic members of the press—is the assumption that the Bush administration is waging a vendetta against Langley's upper echelons for their hostility toward the administration and their embarrassing leaks to the press, especially before the 2004 elections. The current version of this theme, best articulated by Howard Dean, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, posits a completely apolitical, professional CIA—correctly analyzing Iraq (weapons of mass destruction excepted, of course)—being pounded by a partisan, bellicose, mendacious Republican administration, punishing those who speak truth to power.

One has the sneaking suspicion that Mr. Dean, like others in politics and the press, really has no

idea at all what CIA case officers, working-level analysts, and their few Iraqi reporting assets (overwhelmingly expatriate cliques of former Baathist Sunni military officers) were writing about Iraq from 2001 until the invasion. I will take a bet that not a single analyst or Iraq task-force case officer foresaw, in a written report, the all-important role of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani and the senior Shiite clergy, the power of the Salafi fundamentalist movement among the Sunnis, or the speed and nature of the Sunni insurgency before the insurgency actually developed.

But a remote understanding of the CIA has not prevented Mr. Dean, and others, from speaking with certainty about how astute Langley was in Iraq. Few seem to suggest that some in the senior management of the CIA might possibly want to rewrite history to make themselves look better, or that agency officers, like senior State Department officials, can occasionally misbehave and forget that they are apolitical executive-branch officers.

## The Reality of a Flawed Agency

So what do we actually know about the state of the CIA—especially the clandestine service, which has always defined the agency? And what can we say about Porter Goss’s brief tenure?

The one thing we know for sure is that Mr. Goss certainly did not degrade the capabilities of Langley, given how poor the espionage capacity already was. And the agency’s covert-action (CA) capabilities—against targets that really mattered (for example, Iran)—were for most purposes nonexistent when Mr. Goss arrived and remain so today (the brain and muscle for these things take years to develop). A working-level CIA officer familiar with the operations directorate’s Iran assets described Langley’s CA abilities inside Iran from 2000 through 2004 as “unchanged: they’re zero.”

Unknowingly, Ms. Harman also reveals how stubbornly the CIA has refused to alter the method, and thus the effectiveness, of deploying its case officers overseas. According to the congresswoman, “I just saw those people in the field in the Middle East, in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan and Israel last week. I saw the new recruits and I saw the chiefs of station in these states . . . [and] they’re doing a lot better.”

With all due respect to Ms. Harman, in all probability, they are not. No chief of station or case officer would

ever discuss active operational cases or files in sufficient detail or historical depth to allow her or her staff to make any judgment whatsoever on the quality of foreign-intelligence assets being run in any of these countries.

Chiefs of station and case officers will, however, do dog-and-pony shows for congressmen, which have been, over the years, remarkably effective in playing on the patriotic chords of our elected officials. (I must confess that I once did one for senior congressmen visiting “the farm,” the CIA’s espionage training facility located in the

Virginia swamp lands. I came away believing that Abraham Lincoln’s dictum about fooling all of the people some of the time might need to be revised in the case of Congressional intelligence-oversight committee members.)

The CIA has stubbornly refused to move away from stations and bases within official facilities overseas, where most American operatives pose as fake diplomats. Such officers were undoubtedly most of the folks Ms. Harman met. This official-cover deployment, combined with a promotion system premised overwhelmingly on a “head-count” of “recruited” agents, had atrociously poor results during the Cold War, producing hundreds of assets on the books with no real intelligence value, except as means for case-officer advancement and cash performance awards.

Foreign intelligence services, if minimally competent, can identify and track these officers when they choose to focus their surveillance resources, which has happened much more frequently since the end of the Cold War. It is simply absurd to believe that these officially covered operatives, who still represent a preponderant majority of case officers stationed overseas, have much value against an Islamic terrorist target or any hard target protected by a competent counterespionage service (for example, a Pakistani military officer with access to Pakistan’s nuclear-weapons program).

The upper mid-level and senior case officers who have left the agency since Mr. Goss’s appointment are operatives who prospered in a thoroughly corrupt service. This is not the type of “experience” that you would want to preserve.

If one used Ms. Harman’s idea of lost collective experience and soberly assessed the number of operatives now serving in the CIA who offer no real value against any hard target—they either lack the skill, are permanently compromised by overseas postings with bad cover, are too old to work against young-man targets (which is

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emphatically the case with the Islamic militant target), or are too encumbered with family to be deployed sensibly as nonofficial cover officers against this threat—the Bush administration and Congress should want to shed about 15,000 years of “experience” (multiplying the number of years in service by the number of irretrievably mediocre case officers). If this number seems shockingly large, then that only underscores how surreal the discussion has been in Washington about the depth of Langley’s systemic problems.

### **The Future of CIA Reform**

Regrettably, reform at the CIA is now dead. The only real chance opened immediately after 9/11 and closed when President Bush decided to retain the services of George

Tenet, who always remained close and sympathetic to the operations directorate. Ms. Harman, many other prominent Democrats, and the anti-Bush press have put another nail into the clandestine service’s coffin by rallying around an organization that desperately needs to be radically deconstructed. However tepidly or lazily Mr. Goss approached his work, he and his abrasive minions ought to be complimented for at least firing somebody. Given the history of the CIA, this is not an insignificant achievement.

In the 1980s, it was the Republican Party which was hopelessly lost concerning the supposed value and achievements of the CIA. Today, it is the Democrats who have lost it. This is a pity. The first-rate young men and women at the CIA, who have been quitting Langley quietly in large numbers for decades, deserve better.