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Hill Sentiment Grows For Easing Restrictions On CIA Covert Action

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There is growing sentiment both in the Carter administration and among members of Congress, brought to a head by the crises in Iran and Afghanistan, that the time has come to ease the restrictions on U.S. intelligence operations, especially for the CIA.

Administration sources say President Carter has not assigned the highest priority to legislation that would make it easier for the CIA to conduct covert intelligence-gathering and other operations. But an increased intelligence capability is one of four major objectives that have grown out of the Middle East confrontations, the sources say.

The other three are to build up the military strength of the United States and its allies, to increase the U.S. naval presence in the area and to gain access to bases in the Indian Ocean, where only the island of Diego Garcia is now available for U.S. planes and ships.

White House sources say that, with Congress not in session and decisions on Iran and Afghanistan being made on a day-to-day basis, the efforts to loosen restrictions on the CIA have not yet reached high gear. But the administration has concluded that legislative changes must be made to give the United States a better quality of intelligence than it has been getting since the early 70s.

The target of the administration and of many legislators of like mind is to repeal the so-called Hughes-Ryan Amendment, which requires the CIA to inform eight separate congressional committees of its plans for clandestine operations. This amendment also bars such operations unless each one is personally approved by the president.

"There's almost as much sentiment among members of Congress for a better intelligence product as there is in the White House," said one administration aide. The CIA refused to comment on the groundswell of opinion for a freer hand but it is known that the agency feels it can afford to take a backseat and let the administration and individual members of Congress "take the point" position.

No one in the administration would acknowledge that the driving force behind the intelligence reform move is an intention to use the CIA to channel arms and advisers to the anti-Soviet Afghans in Pakistan or Afghanistan, or to undertake any operations involving the increasing chaos in Iran.

A new charter for the CIA is very much on the front burner and such a proposal will go to Congress in the next session. The agency currently is operating under terms of an executive order issued by Carter in 1978.

The general idea developing at the White House and on Capitol Hill is to reduce the number of members of Congress that have to be informed in advance about CIA projects. The administration would prefer that only the Senate and House Intelligence Committees be made privy to CIA plans and that presidential approval be required only for high-risk political ventures.

At the heart of the matter is the conviction that the present requirement for informing members of eight committees of CIA operations creates a high likelihood of leaks.

The Associated Press reported yesterday that Sen. Walter Huddleston, D-Ky, chairman of an intelligence subcommittee, hopes to have a reform bill pass in the Senate within two months. Reportedly Majority Leader Robert C. Byrd, D-WVa, agreed last week to give such a bill priority in the upcoming session.

Huddleston was quoted as saying the bill would give the CIA greater flexibility for beginning operations to counter the Soviet expansionism in the Near East and in the Iranian hostage situation.

National security analysts believe that U.S. intelligence capabilities have been badly degraded to the point of becoming ineffective as an arm of foreign policy.

The broad disclosures of CIA wrongdoing in the early 70s had a traumatic effect on the agency in the public mind and on CIA morale. One direct result of the disclosures of activities ranging from foolish to brutal, including political assassination plans and illegal activities within the U.S., was a house-cleaning at the CIA.

After Adm. Stansfield Turner took charge, more than 800 CIA officers were discharged from the covert operations division and about 2,000 others were forced into retirement.

There have been major intelligence failures since some of the CIA's innermost secrets were laid bare and the agency was nearly immobilized by scandals and investigations.

The agency failed to predict that the shah of Iran would be toppled and that the American Embassy personnel in Tehran were in dire peril.

The CIA also was slow to realize that the Sandinistas were capable of overthrowing Gen. Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua; was unable to advise the president whether a nuclear explosion had occurred last September near South Africa; was surprised by North Yemen's acceptance of Soviet aid and advisers after the United States had sent North Yemen \$400 million in military supplies.

The increasing role of the Soviets, Cubans and East Germans in the Third World has made a revival of U.S. intelligence capability mandatory to the administration and to many members of Congress as well.

No one is talking about giving the CIA a blank check, such as was used and abused when the agency operated without much supervision of any kind. But there is a conviction in Washington that the agency was nearly put out of business by the revelations of the 70s and that it is time for its rebirth as an essential part of the foreign policy process.