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CIA'S CAN OF WORMS

The Oregonian (portland, Oregon), EDITORIAL; Pg. C06
May, 09 1997
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654 words

Friday, May 9, 1997 CIA'S CAN OF WORMS

Summary - Director nominee escapes questioning on Iraq fiasco, but will have to face up to problem once in control

The Central Intelligence Agency has spent six years and \$110 million trying to overthrow Saddam Hussein in the most expensive sustained failure in agency history.

Refusing to admit defeat, the White House orders this international embarrassment prolonged to avoid being accused on doing nothing about Iraq.

The Senate Intelligence Committee passed up a golden opportunity to educate itself and the American public on Tuesday when it failed to probe CIA Director-designate George J. Tenet on this topic in Tenet's public confirmation hearing.

It will be up to Tenet when he is confirmed to decide what to do about this continuing failure, in which he played a significant role as a member of President Clinton's National Security Council staff and then as deputy director of the CIA.

The story Tenet could assemble would rival any spy novel. Interviews in Washington and Europe with CIA personnel, Iraqi dissidents and foreign intelligence sources provide new insights.

Some Americans who worked in Iraq covertly now wonder whether the agency was a victim of an elaborate sting perpetrated by Saddam, who watched with a benign eye as the CIA funneled money and Iraqi military defectors into a Jordan-based exile group for two years before effortlessly rolling up that organization and exposing its American roots last summer.

``The guys in Amman were promising us a ziiless coup, telling us they had the silver bullet that would change Iraq," said one American who worked on the Iraq covert program. ``They were put out of business in an afternoon."

Despite that failure, the agency is set to provide \$4.8 million in covert funds to that group, the Iraqi National Accord, again this year according to my sources.

That could change. Jordan's King Hussein is considering shutting down the agency-financed, accord-run radio known as the Voice of the Future.

That would be a grievous setback for the anti-Saddam effort that was conceived and pursued in halfhearted fashion after President Bush declined to use military might to **remove Saddam** in 1991.

Bush put up \$40 million as a down payment on Saddam's removal when he secretly ordered the agency to create the conditions for Saddam's downfall in 1991. Much of that money went to buy and move a clandestine radio transmitter from Croatia and to finance a London-based propaganda operation that turned out fake Baghdad newspapers, television films and radio broadcasts.

Within the agency, the Iraq operation was instantly seen by some -- including Frank Anderson, former head of the Middle East department -- as a can of worms. These officers knew they would never get enough money or political support to engage in an all-out war against Saddam.

That feeling was reinforced when annual funding was cut to \$20 million in late 1992, and then to \$15 million in 1994, after Clinton came to the White House and adopted Bush's program in a memorandum of notification to Congress.

In Iraq, the agency has been used as ``the last resort of failed policy," words used by Tenet on Tuesday

to describe something that should never happen to the CIA. He did not mention Iraq, but agency veterans knew what he had in mind.

It is still unclear how deep and how self-critical Tenet's assessment of the Iraq failure runs. He enthusiastically backed the Iraqi accord's "zipless coup" option when he became deputy director of the CIA two years ago. If there was a Saddam sting, he was one of its principal victims.

Senate confirmation will give Tenet a rare chance to clean up a mess he helped make. If he does not take it and quickly shape a covert program capable of producing change in Iraq, Congress should step in swiftly with its own investigation of a national humiliation.

1997, Washington Post Writers Group

Editor's Note: Newspaper

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