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COMMENTARY

THOMAS PATRICK CARROLL

The Case Against Intelligence Openness

The Cold War is over and it is high time the U.S. Intelligence Community started acting like it, according to influential opinion. Critics say America's secret agencies have too many secrets. To them, openness is the order of the day; declassification is good, and secret-hoarding is bad. Let sunlight flood the shadowy corridors of our covert organizations—particularly the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)—and America will be the better for it.

This point of view is alluring. It appeals to all those who value accountable, democratic government. But it's wrong.

THE OPENNESS LOBBY

The apostles of greater openness are an intimidating group. Take, for example, the *Report of the Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy*,[1] issued in 1997 and in many ways the manifesto of the "Openness Lobby."[2] The Commission included Senator Jesse Helms (R. North Carolina), former Director of Central Intelligence John Deutch, Professor Samuel P. Huntington of Harvard University, and numerous other luminaries. The Commission member most widely associated with the openness cause was its chairman, then-Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D. New York). Moynihan followed his work on the Commission with an excellent book,[3] Secrecy, (and many public appearances) arguing for greater openness, less secrecy, and a full-blown national declassification program.[4]

Thomas Patrick Carroll, a former officer in the Central Intelligence Agency's Directorate of Operations, is a specialist in Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean affairs.

Apart from having people of this caliber on the team, the Openness Lobby makes some insightful observations and sound suggestions. After all, the Intelligence Community's system of classification and secrecy was built in the middle of the twentieth century, and no doubt it could stand a little refurbishing for the Information Age.

WHERE THE OPENNESS LOBBY GOES WRONG

But no silver lining this shiny could come without a dark cloud. There are three major problems with the Openness program: One is an underestimation of the risks and costs, and the other two are overestimations of the probable benefits. Taken together, they push the Openness Lobby into advocating a broader and more aggressive set of reforms than circumstances and prudence warrant.

1. Problem of Intelligence Sources and Methods: The Openness Lobby underestimates the risks associated with (and resources required for) the kind of aggressive, accelerated, large-scale declassification program that it advocates.[5] In particular, it fails to appreciate the difficulties swirling around the CIA's need to protect its sources and methods. Of course, this is not necessarily a deal-killer. If the benefits of more openness are sufficiently great, then maybe they could offset the costs and risks. Unfortunately, the supposed benefits are being wildly oversold, thus bringing up problems two and three.
2. Intelligence Failures and the Culture of Secrecy: The Openness Lobby claims a "culture of secrecy" distorts the analytical product of America's intelligence agencies. Commonly trotted out as Exhibit A is the CIA's alleged failure to predict the fall of the Soviet Union. This putative intelligence failure is roughly 50 percent exaggeration and 50 percent plain error.
3. Secrecy and the Warping of World Views: The Openness Lobby argues that official secrecy has, at crucial times in United States history, significantly warped the world view of important segments of the American public, notably the intellectuals. The most striking example offered concerns the American Left and its attitude toward Communist espionage, subversion, and general aggression throughout the Cold War. According to this argument, a major reason much of the Left adopted its famously benign view of the Communist threat was because the U.S. government kept secret its intelligence on the true extent of the USSR's clandestine attack against the West, an attack that peaked during and shortly after World War II, but which lasted more or less throughout the Cold War. If those on the Left had but known what the CIA and other intelligence agencies knew (but kept secret), they

would have been as anti-Soviet as the White Russian nobility, according to the emerging lore. This is the Openness Lobby's most interesting contention, but it does not hold up well under scrutiny.

Each of these three points will now be examined in detail.

PROBLEM OF INTELLIGENCE SOURCES AND METHODS

Despite frequent references to ''open source intelligence,'' within the CIA this term is somewhat an oxymoron. By definition, intelligence is clandestinely acquired information—stolen, to put it bluntly. Information from a magazine, a television broadcast, or someone's newsletter may be valuable, but it is not intelligence.

There are different ways to steal information, different ways to commit espionage. Information can be stolen through technical means, e.g., enciphered telegrams from foreign embassies can be intercepted and decoded, a computer can be hacked, or satellites can surreptitiously photograph a terrorist training camp hidden in the desert. The theft can also be the work of a human agent, perhaps by slipping classified documents into a briefcase when leaving work at the end of the day—the classic secret agent of the spy novels. Intelligence obtained by secret agents is called HUMINT, the stock-in-trade of the CIA's Clandestine Service.

However the material is stolen, its theft involves two extremely sensitive components, neither of which is properly appreciated by the Openness Lobby. The first is who or what did the stealing—the *source*. The second is how the theft was accomplished—the *method*.

To illustrate, suppose the CIA has recruited the personal assistant to the foreign minister of an Arab country. During the course of his normal duties, the assistant casually engages the minister in a conversation about the current Syrian/Israeli peace process, and obtains the minister's private observations on the matter. The assistant then relays the observations to his CIA case officer at their next clandestine meeting. Here the source is the personal assistant, and the method is elicitation during his private conversation with the Foreign Minister.

The intelligence provided by the personal assistant will be classified (probably SECRET) and transmitted in a report back to CIA Headquarters. But why is this intelligence secret? Because of its content? That probably has something to do with it, but whatever the intrinsic sensitivity of the intelligence itself, the main reason for the SECRET stamp is to protect the foreign minister's personal assistant and the private conversation they had—i.e., to protect intelligence sources and methods. If the content of this conversation were to leak out and the minister (or his country's security services) were to get wind of it, the list

of likely suspects might be short indeed. In fact, depending on the closeness of his relationship with the minister, the personal assistant might find himself on a list of one. The grim consequences are obvious.[6]

What goes for intelligence provided by this hypothetical ministerial assistant goes for all intelligence. In the world of espionage, classification usually has relatively little to do with the information itself, but a lot to do with the protection of sources and methods. When dealing with HUMINT, the protection of sources and methods means protecting human beings (the agents) from detection by the opposition, where detection can mean jail or worse.

This is where problems arise for any broad or aggressive declassification program the Openness Lobby may care to float.

First, people outside the espionage business have a difficult time appreciating the importance of sources and methods. There is a natural tendency to look at the content of the information and, if it seems innocuous, to assume that its public distribution would be harmless. Even worldly and seasoned foreign policy officials with all the requisite security clearances (but no espionage experience) easily slide into this trap. State Department diplomats, for example, all too commonly make public reference to information they read in classified CIA HUMINT reporting. Their instinctive assumption is that if the material seems banal, there is probably no harm in disclosing it.

Notwithstanding all the careful work that went into its creation, even the *Report of the Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy* is not immune from this affliction. The section "Clarifying Protection of Sources and Methods Information" contains the following:

> Underlying many sources and methods claims is the fact that the secret being protected is not the content of the information itself, but instead how it was obtained. Yet the public and historians generally do not care how information was collected; they want to know how it was used and what decisions it informed.

But the fact that "historians generally do not care how the information was collected" is completely beside the point. As indicated, information about sources and methods can be easily betrayed within the intelligence itself, regardless of whether the source is explicitly described. And that is precisely the danger. A slip like this in a paper as thoughtful as the *Report of the Commission* presents a clear example of how easy it is for those who are not espionage professionals to forget the true nature of the problem of sources and methods. And any large-scale declassification program would probably need to employ plenty of people lacking espionage backgrounds; there simply are not that many CIA officers.

But, overlooking the staffing problem, and assuming a sufficient number of experienced intelligence officers (with time on their hands) to do the job, does this permit an escape from the woods? No.

Besides the *macro* problem of protecting sources and methods, there is also the *micro* problem—i.e., the problem of protecting sources and methods associated with any particular intelligence report.

Now, if dealing with intelligence obtained through ''national technical means'' (e.g., a photograph taken from a spy satellite), the task is relatively simple. Does the photograph reveal sources and methods that need to remain secret? Maybe the resolution of this individual image is so low that nobody could ever guess the system's true capabilities from it. In that case, the photo can be declassified. Or maybe the whole satellite system is no longer ''leading edge,'' and therefore none of its photographs are worth keeping secret. Again, declassification is suitable.

In leaving technically acquired intelligence, however, and moving into the realm of HUMINT, the questions become stickier.

A HUMINT report comes from a secret agent—from a person who has trusted the U.S. government with his career, his freedom, and in some cases his life. The protection of HUMINT sources and methods must therefore last until the agent's (hopefully natural) death, and quite possibly even beyond that. (He may have children who need protecting, for instance.)

So how can the source be kept sufficiently hidden when declassifying a HUMINT document?[7] By looking for content that could betray his identity. But who knows what that content is? Really only a handful of people—those in the overseas station who obtained the intelligence initially (probably through a clandestine meeting with the agent), and maybe a few who follow the case back at CIA Headquarters.

But this small group is perpetually disintegrating. People go on to other jobs and cases, are transferred to new posts, retire, and resign. On a practical level, source-revealing content must be identified through the laborious task of reading an agent's entire case file, starting with the operational cables. (Operational cables document everything known about the agent—personal history, motivation, intelligence access, contact plans, and so forth.)

Once the operational cables are read and understood (and this can be considerable), whatever piece of the agent's reporting is up for declassification must be reviewed. And then, someone who possesses the habits and training of an espionage professional can probably make an informed judgment about whether this particular piece of intelligence can be safely declassified, at least from the point of view of sources and methods.

The point here is that none of this is easy. If done correctly and securely, the process is difficult, expensive, and time-consuming. And it must be done correctly and securely—the protection of America's agents abroad demands nothing less. Moreover, it is not as though those engaged in declassification work have nothing else to do. Again, they must be experienced in the arcane arts of espionage. This means that instead of declassifying vintage 1960 intelligence on Soviet illegals in Canada, they could be collecting and processing intelligence on today's threats—intelligence that could save lives and advance America's global interests.

So a trade-off is necessary. No one believes intelligence should never be declassified; that would be ridiculous. Virtually everyone agrees that, all things being equal, a democratic government should be as open toward its citizenry as possible. But all things are not equal. And, because the responsible declassification of HUMINT requires a significant redirection of valuable resources, an accelerated, aggressive declassification program means that other important intelligence priorities would be put on the back burner. Therefore, such a program should be pursued only if significant national benefits are likely to accrue.

But, of course, the Openness Lobby does believe there would be such benefits. Is the Lobby correct?

INTELLIGENCE FAILURES AND THE CULTURE OF SECRECY

According to the Openness Lobby, the first casualty of the Intelligence Community's "culture of secrecy" is the intelligence product itself. Classified documents take on a prestige, an aura of authority and reliability, far beyond anything their content actually warrants. Analysts tend to ignore information or opinions from unclassified sources—even when those sources may be superior to the classified material—and are instead drawn inexorably toward anything stamped SECRET. Or, better yet, TOP SECRET. This tendency creates a bias against good open source material, skews the intelligence product, and has led to disastrous results. Or so says the Openness Lobby.

Plenty of anecdotes support the belief that classified information carries more prestige and psychological clout than it should, but the Openness Lobby endlessly sites the CIA's alleged failure to predict the fall of the Soviet Empire. Before getting to the events leading up to 1989, consideration of anecdotes and impressions from the other side of this "allure of secrecy" question is worthwhile.

First, while some people are unduly dazzled by the CIA's clandestine reporting, the prejudices of many intelligence consumers run in just the opposite direction. During one of my overseas postings, I worked with an

American diplomat who completely discounted CIA intelligence. All of it. He used to say to me, ''CIA agents are paid. If you're paying people for information, they'll tell you what they think you want to hear, regardless of whether it's true.'' His wholesale dismissal of CIA reporting was atypical, but a diluted form of his attitude is not uncommon.

Second, as with anything else, the glamour and novelty of the intelligence product tends to dull over time. Consumers get used to it. The SECRET stamp no longer shocks. An intelligence analyst with more than six months experience will be fairly jaded and unlikely to invest classified information with authority its does not deserve.[8]

Third, the CIA's Clandestine Service disseminates its reporting with caveats. In many ways and in many venues, the Agency makes analysts throughout the Intelligence Community well aware of the tentative nature of all its intelligence, especially its HUMINT. The CIA warns analysts to read its raw intelligence with a skeptical eye, and most of them follow that advice.

CIA's Performance on the East Bloc vs. the USSR

Former Senator Moynihan, the Openness Lobby's most prominent expositor, approvingly quotes the comments of former Director of Central Intelligence Admiral Stansfield Turner, who wrote in a 1991 *Foreign Affairs* article: ''We should not gloss over the enormity of this failure to forecast the magnitude of the Soviet crisis.'' According to Turner: ''If some individual CIA analysts were more prescient than the corporate view, their ideas were filtered out in the bureaucratic process; and it is the corporate view that counts because that is what reaches the president and his advisers. On this one, the corporate view missed by a mile. Why were so many of us insensitive to the inevitable?'' To which Moynihan replied: ''The answer has to be, at least in part, that too much of the information was secret, not sufficiently open to critique by persons outside government.''[9]

So, according to Moynihan, the CIA failed to see the end coming, and some of the blame lies in the Agency's culture of secrecy. This belief, shared throughout the Openness Lobby, is not unique to Moynihan. If true, it would indeed be a powerful argument for radically constricting the circle of official secrecy. But it is not true.

As can be expected, given the seriousness of the charge, many people have looked into the allegation about the CIA's supposed failure to appreciate the decline of the Soviet Union, at least before its demise was all but complete. Their findings, more or less uniformly, defeat the notion that the CIA missed the most important call of the Cold War.[10] For example:

(a) In November 1999, the CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence and the George W. Bush Center for Presidential Studies at Texas A&M University cosponsored a scholarly conference entitled U.S. Intelligence and the End of the Cold War.[11] The goal of the conference was, inter alia, to assess the value of the intelligence and analysis that the CIA provided to policy makers during the decline and fall of the Soviet Empire. The conference's conclusion:

> An objective reading of the NIEs [National Intelligence Estimates] and other documents ... refutes the allegation that readers of the intelligence assessments at the time of their publication would have come away misinformed about the direction of events and shape of the policies in the Soviet Union. They also reject the idea that the Intelligence Community ignored the impending collapse of communism and the breakup of the Soviet Union. In fact, the community was probably ahead of most analysis on this issue.[12]

(b) Next, Douglas MacEachin, former Deputy Director for Intelligence at the CIA, after giving the issue considerable professional and scholarly attention, stated that "charges that the CIA did not see and report the economic decline, societal deterioration, and political destabilization that ultimately resulted in the breakup of the Soviet Union simply are contradicted by the record."[13] MacEachin does believe this affair raises disturbing questions, but they of quite a different order:

> [H]ow could the world at large, including so many former policy officials, have developed such a distorted perception of what the CIA said? ... What the enormous gap between CIA's analytic record and the perception of that record demonstrates—at least in the view of this author—is that the channel of communication between CIA and the policy community has, at best, been poor, and for good portions of the time it has been nonfunctional.[14]

(c) And finally, Loch K. Johnson, Regents Professor of Political Science at the University of Georgia and a widely respected expert on U.S. intelligence, investigated the CIA's analytical performance in the years leading up to the fall of the USSR. To be sure, Johnson finds much to fault in the Agency's product during that time, and his criticisms are insightful. Still, his overall verdict is positive:

> Above all, though, Moynihan and other critics have not paid enough attention to the serious analysis that did emerge from SOVA [the CIA's Office of Soviet Analysis] during the final years of the Cold War. The fact is that SOVA tracked events in the Soviet Union fairly well, including the sharp decline in its economy and the political travail that afflicted President Gorbachev.[15]

SECRECY AND THE WARPING OF WORLD VIEWS

The last of the three points made by the Openness Lobby, regarding the Government's Warping of Opinion, is the most fascinating and, potentially, the most significant. Its scope is so large that it is almost impossible either to confirm or falsify, but it must be dealt with nonetheless.

When stripped of hyperbole, the claim is essentially that the U.S. government withheld certain secret material from the American public at critical times, and that because of this, the public did not have adequate information to construct an informed opinion about important features of the political world. In other words, official secrecy measurably warped the world view of a significant slice of U.S. citizenry.

This is not the trivial claim that government secrets keep people in the dark about specific facts (e.g., Qadhafi's support for some particular terrorist camp), for obviously they do. Rather, the claim is that the withholding of U.S. government information has (at times) been consequential enough to lead entire segments of the population into world views sharply at variance with reality. Less government secrecy, the Openness Lobby contends, is the vaccine necessary to inoculate the public against the recurrence of such epistemic maladies.

Before getting to the most persuasive case of a world view allegedly distorted by the withholding of secret information, some general comments need to be made.

During my years in the CIA's Clandestine Service, I never once saw anyone's world view affected by classified information. Officials with access to government secrets will be aware of particulars that remain unknown to outsiders, but the large, sweeping currents of national and international affairs are those that shape a person's world view, and these are known to any American who can read a newspaper or history book. For instance, a U.S. intelligence officer back in 1985 might have known of a specific arms shipment from Cuba to Central America, and that knowledge might have been available only through classified agent reporting. But that same officer's view of the big picture—i.e., that Cuba was a Soviet proxy bent on exporting Communist revolution—came not from secret sources, but from thousands of pieces of public information assimilated over the years. To cite another example, every CIA colleague with whom I ever worked in the Middle East knew Hafiz al-Assad supported anti-Israeli terrorism, but not because they heard about it through classified dispatches from secret against. They knew Assad supported terrorism because they read the newspapers, just like other Americans.

The fact is, when compared with everything else that goes into shaping an individual's world view, there just are not enough secrets to make much of a dent—not in the West at least, and certainly not in the United States.

With a few possible exceptions that span short periods of time, there simply are not secrets big enough to affect a thoughtful person's world view even slightly, much less be the deciding factor.[16]

In short, there are no secrets held by the U.S. government that, if known, would alter the world view of any reasonably informed citizen.

EXAMINING THE ALTERNATE VIEW

Now for evidence regarding the opposing position.

The best counterexample to my argument is that of the American Left's attitude toward the Communist threat during the Cold War. Returning to Moynihan, historian Richard Gid Powers quotes the senator in his introduction to *Secrecy*:

> "What if the American government had disclosed the Communist conspiracy when it first learned of it?" Moynihan asked. That might have "informed the legitimately patriotic American left that there was, indeed, a problem that the Federal Bureau of Investigation, for example, was legitimately trying to address. But this did not happen. Ignorant armies clashed by night."[17]

And what, precisely, did the government know about the "Communist conspiracy" that the American Left did not? In a word, VENONA.[18]

The VENONA project began in the 1940s to intercept and decode encrypted Soviet government telegrams between the United States (primarily Washington, DC and New York City) and Moscow. The telegrams were sent in the mid-1940s, but the decoding continued until 1980, when the National Security Agency (NSA), America's main cryptographic organization, decided the material was too old to be of any further intelligence value.[19] The decryptions revealed a large, stunningly successful Soviet espionage effort directed against American government and industry. VENONA pinpointed Soviet agents in practically every strategic corner of the U.S. government, and at amazingly high levels. They documented the widespread involvement of the Communist Party USA in espionage against the United States, corroborated the testimonies of Whitaker Chambers and Elizabeth Bentley, and even tipped off the government to Soviet penetration of the Manhattan Project.

VENONA remained a secret until 11 July 1995, when the existence of the project was disclosed to the public in an official ceremony at CIA Headquarters in Langley, Virginia.[20] Over the next two years, the VENONA intercepts, numbering more than 2,900, were released to scholars and the public.

Did keeping VENONA secret warp the public's—and, particularly, the Left's—view of Communist subversion? Was the belief on the part of the Left that the Soviets were essentially reactive and that blame for the Cold War lay primarily with the U.S. government due, ironically, to Washington's own secretiveness? Were the wounds to Washington's credibility, to some significant degree, self-inflicted, as this tale would have it?

Moynihan and others believe so. Even Cold War scholars and VENONA experts John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr seem to lend support:

> ... the success of government secrecy in this case [i.e., VENONA] has seriously distorted our understanding of post-World War II history. Hundreds of books and thousands of essays on McCarthyism, the federal loyalty security program, Soviet espionage, American communism, and the early Cold War have perpetuated many myths that have given Americans a warped view of the nation's history in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. The information these messages reveal substantially revises the basis for understanding the early history of the Cold War and of America's concern with Soviet espionage and Communist subversion.[21]

What can be said about this theory? It is plausible, certainly—one need not be irrational to believe it. But nonetheless, the story has problems.

To begin with, there is the venerable philosophical axiom that "ought" implies "can." In other words, to say something ought to be done is meaningless if it cannot be done. So the question becomes: Could the U.S. government have made VENONA public early enough in the Cold War to have averted the left's embarrassing anti-anti-Communism, assuming for the moment that the VENONA secret significantly contributed to the Left's erroneous beliefs?

Well, certainly not in the 1940s. Stalin was still alive, and most of the VENONA cables concerned what were then contemporary events. To argue for declassification at such a time would be reckless and dangerous, something the Openness Lobby (at least its responsible element) would undoubtedly eschew. The same goes for the 1950s—the intelligence value of VENONA remained strong, especially since this was an era when so very little was known about what was actually happening within the Soviet Union. In the 1960s and 1970s, the argument for declassification might have been made, but it is difficult to deny that the case looks stronger in hindsight than it would have to those actually making decisions at the time. The point is that the VENONA cables simply could not have been made public during those early Cold War years (the late

1940s, early 1950s) when Moynihan and the Openness Lobby believe they might have saved the Left from its ridiculously naive stance vis-à-vis the USSR and international communism.

But, waiving this important objection, and, for the sake of argument, asserting that VENONA could have been responsibly declassified in the 1940s or 1950s, would the affect on the Left likely have been as salutary as Moynihan believes? There are reasons for doubt.

To begin with, the Left had consistently done a fine job of ignoring the evidence of Soviet malevolence that was then available, and there was plenty. From 1917 on, the brutal nature of the Soviet Union was manifest to those who viewed the world without blinders, despite the efforts made by Soviet leaders and their sympathizers abroad to hide the horror. In 1931, without help from any classified government secrets, Pope Pius XI was able to pen *Quadragesimo Anno*, a clear-headed and unblinking exposition of the inhuman Soviet reality. What set the Pope's world view apart from that of the pro-Soviet Left was not access to hidden information, but simply the willingness to look honestly at the facts that were available to all. The Pope did not need VENONA to understand the USSR and its intentions, and neither did anyone else.

So VENONA was not a prerequisite for the construction of a world view that took the Soviet reality into proper account. But still the point might be pressed. Granted that knowledge of VENONA was not a necessary condition for an accurate appraisal of the Soviet Union, the Openness Lobby might still argue that might have been a sufficient condition, at least for some people. In other words, VENONA might just have provided that extra push necessary to tip a sizeable portion of the Left over into reality, at least on the subject of the USSR's strategic designs.

Though possible, it seems unlikely. To see why, a look at the reaction when VENONA was made public is useful.

First, some prominent Leftists, including *The Nation* publisher Victor Navasky and the late lawyer William Kuntsler, dismissed the decryptions as a government hoax, with Kuntsler opining that, since they came from the U.S. government, the VENONA transcripts should be treated as frauds.[22] Admittedly, these two men represented the hardcore, but, still, VENONA did not help them see the light. And their attitudes would certainly have been more common back in the 1940s and 1950s than they are today.

But what about the mainstream Leftists? How have they reacted to VENONA? Have the newly released decryptions affected their world views?

To answer this question, consideration must be given to the staggering level of mid-century Soviet espionage actually revealed by VENONA. The Office of Strategic Services (OSS), America's World War spy agency and the precursor to today's CIA, was penetrated by 15 to 20 Soviet spies. The War

Production Board, the Board of Economic Warfare, the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, and the Office of War Information each had at least six Soviet penetrations. The State Department contained a minimum of six Soviet sources, including the Secretary of State's Assistant for Special Political Affairs, Alger Hiss, and the head of the Division of American Republics, Laurence Duggan. Assistant Secretary of the Treasury (and cooperative clandestine contact of Soviet intelligence) Harry Dexter White helped make Treasury safe for Soviet spies—eight that are known about. Lauchlin Currie, President Roosevelt's administrative assistant, was a Soviet source. Theodore Hall and Klaus Fuchs were Soviet penetrations of the Manhattan Project. Duncan Lee, senior aide to the head of the OSS, was a Soviet spy. The Silvermaster and Perlo espionage networks in Washington spread their spies throughout the Federal government. And on, and on. The VENONA decryptions reveal that hundreds of Americans, many in very sensitive government positions, cooperated with Soviet intelligence.[23]

And what has the reaction been on the part of the responsible Left? Have world views been altered? Some have, no doubt, but on nowhere near the scale to be expected if the VENONA secret really had the effect the Openness Lobby claims it did. Important details are being added to history books (mostly by historians who already understood and appreciated the nature of the Cold War long before VENONA was made public), but new details in history books are not equivalent to broad changes in world views. For instance, in a 1999 *Commentary*[24] article, Gabriel Schoenfeld looked at CNN's *Cold War* documentary and found the same sort of moral equivalence, both-sides-are-to-blame mentality heard from the Left throughout the Cold War. No significant shift in world views was effected by the VENONA revelations in this case.

No, the Left cannot plausibly blame U.S. government secrecy for its embarrassing conduct during the Cold War. The sober truth is that the fault lies with the Left's own ideological blindness. The French scholar Stéphane Courtois put it well:

> Many will say that they "didn't know." Undoubtedly, of course, it was not always easy to learn the facts or to discover the truth, for Communist regimes had mastered the art of censorship as their favorite technique for concealing their true activities. But quite often this ignorance was merely the result of ideologically motivated self-deception. [25]

And if the wholesale, coordinated, smothering, no-holds-barred secrecy of the Communist regimes cannot provide the Left with an excuse for its refusal to acknowledge the criminality and hostility of the Soviet

Bloc—and it cannot—then neither can the limited, prudent, and circumscribed secrecy practiced by the U.S. government, e.g., the VENONA project.

BEWARE THE SIREN SONG

The Openness Lobby calls for an aggressive and sweeping program of declassification and transparency. But it seriously underestimates the difficulties, risks, and costs implicit in such a scheme, particularly with respect to the CIA. It then points to intelligence failures and the distortion of the public's world views as alleged causalities of the traditional, post-World War II secrecy regime, but in both instances the Lobby fails to make a convincing case.

The system of secrecy that grew up in the early years of the Cold War has served the nation well. It is doubtless cumbersome, frustrating, and at times counterproductive. Some moderate and incremental modernization is surely in order, but no compelling argument has yet been offered to impugn the system's fundamental soundness.

As human contrivances go, America's secrecy regime is good. That fact should be kept in mind, lest the United States find itself seduced by the siren song of the Openness Lobby.

REFERENCES

[1] The *Report of the Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy* is a thorough, responsible, and useful document, regardless of whether one disagrees (as I do) with some of its recommendations and conclusions.

[2] The Openness Lobby, including the *Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy*, is concerned with more than just secrets within the Intelligence Community. Its scope of interest extends throughout the Executive Branch, and even to a few other parts of the Federal Government.

[3] Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Secrecy: The American Experience* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

[4] I repeatedly turn to Senator Moynihan throughout this article, since his views on this subject seem to be among the most developed, and the most eloquently stated, of any in the Openness Lobby.

[5] As opposed to the slow, routine, and admittedly frustrating declassification regime in place at least since the inception of the Cold War.

[6] For a recent example, see "Taiwanese Mistake Led to 3 Spies' Executions" in *The Washington Post*, 20 February 2000. Briefly, China fired missiles toward Taiwan in 1996. The Taiwanese government issued a statement assuring its citizens that the missiles were unarmed. The Taiwanese said nothing about the source of their information, yet the simple fact that they knew the missiles were

harmless gave the Chinese enough information to identify Taiwan's source. As a result, a Chinese general was executed by the Communists. Taiwan lost an agent, and an agent lost his life.

[7] What is outlined here is not the only way to declassify intelligence responsibly. Nor is it precisely the way it is being done now, or will be done in the future, by the CIA and other U.S. intelligence agencies. But any responsible intelligence declassification program must contain *at least* these elements, and must look substantially like what is here described. There are no shortcuts.

[8] Clandestine reporting often does provide policymakers with important information unavailable in overt publications. It therefore deserves at least some degree of special status. On this point see Loch K. Johnson, *Secret Agencies: U.S. Intelligence in a Hostile World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 3.

[9] Moynihan, *Secrecy*, p. 79.

[10] Since I here argue against the wisdom of an aggressive declassification regime, it seems ironic that in this section I am drawing heavily on academic research that would have been impossible without all the post-Cold War era declassification that has occurred in recent years. And maybe it is. But I do not question the *historical value* of declassified intelligence. What I question is the aggressive and optimistic approach the Openness Lobby takes to this and related issues.

[11] For details on the conference and its conclusions, see *At Cold War's End: U.S. Intelligence on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, 1989–1991*, History Staff, (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1999).

[12] Ibid.

[13] Douglas MacEachin, *CIA Assessments of the Soviet Union: The Record Versus the Charges*, Center for the Study of Intelligence, (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1996).

[14] Ibid.

[15] Johnson, *Secret Agencies*, p. 192.

[16] Looking back over the century, the number of "big secrets" can be counted on one hand. Two that spring immediately to mind are the Allies' code-breaking capability against the Axis during World War II, and the Manhattan Project. Neither stayed secret for long. And while they were secret, would knowing them really have affected the public's world view to any significant degree? The Manhattan Project might have, at least for some people at some level. Then again, maybe not.

[17] Moynihan, *Secrecy*, p. 16.

[18] For the details behind VENONA, see John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *VENONA: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

[19] Ibid., p. 35.

[20] Credit for the VENONA declassification goes, in large part, to the efforts of Senator Moynihan.

[21] Haynes and Klehr, Op. cit., p. 18.

[22] Ibid., p. 399.

[23] Ibid., pp. 331–334.

[24] Gabriel Schoenfeld. "Twenty-Four Lies About the Cold War," *Commentary*, Vol. 107, No. 3, March 1999, pp. 28–35.

[25] Stéphane Courtois, et al., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 11.