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Two Questions for George Tenet

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Finally, the spotlight has started to swing away from Lewis Libby and his allegedly perjurous grand-jury testimony toward where that spotlight should have focused all along: on the CIA's incompetent, weird – and possibly treasonous – response to Vice President Cheney's inquiry about Iraq's interest in purchasing yellowcake from Niger.

Perhaps an outline of how we did things at the CIA during the Reagan Administration will help to illustrate just how appalling the agency's handling of Mr. Cheney's query really was:

One of the first lessons you learn in the intelligence business, is that top-level officials rarely bother to ask for intelligence. They take whatever you provide – gratefully, when the intelligence is directly useful to them; sullenly, when they don't like what you tell them – but otherwise pay no attention to you. Your job as a senior intelligence official is to develop whatever intelligence you believe the policymakers need, and then to “market” that intelligence to the policymakers whether they want it or not. (Meanwhile, you will be driven nuts by the incessant demands for intelligence from low-level officials at the Departments of State and Defense, and even at the White House. Much of what they ask for is obviously important, so you do your best to get it. But some requests are either marginal to our country's security, or were triggered by some spy movie they watched over the weekend – in which case you do nothing, and usually they don't ask a second time.)

Straight to the DCI

It's quite rare for a Cabinet member to actually ask for intelligence – and even more rare for the Vice President or the President to ask – so when they do it's a very big deal. President Reagan's great Director of Central Intelligence, William J. Casey, made clear to all of us that

when a top-level official personally asked the CIA to check into something, he was to be notified immediately. No matter what else was going on that day that demanded Casey's total attention – a revolution in Asia, a covert action in Eastern Europe, another of Bob Woodward's fantasies in *The Washington Post* – a direct query from any of the four or five top Administration officials took precedence over everything else. After all, they were our primary customers.

Casey would call a meeting of relevant intelligence officials to discuss the request, to understand what lay behind the request, and then to organize the job of developing a response. Sometimes, when the query was a simple one – “Just how many SS-20 missiles have the Russians got in Eastern Europe right now?” – we would have the answer in an hour. Other times – “That report you sent over last evening about the Soviet trade mission to Egypt is worrisome, and if you can find out whether any secret agreements were signed in Cairo I'd be grateful.” – we needed longer to respond.

Sometimes we could rely wholly on our own people to do whatever research, or snooping, had to be done. Other times, we needed help from people who didn't work for the CIA – or even for the US government – but who for whatever reason had the access necessary to help get the information we sought. This would include former government officials, academic experts, business executives, scientists and people from the world of politics both here in the US and overseas. Bill Casey was a great CIA director for many reasons, not the least of which was his Rolodex. It was the size of a Ferris wheel. Casey seemed to know everyone on earth who had ever accomplished anything, and he had a genius for flipping through his Rolodex and plucking out the one individual in the entire world capable of helping us find out whatever we needed to know – and then talking that man or woman into lending a hand.

It was always done quietly – if a meeting was necessary, we held it away from the office – and with no paper trail whatever. And we did it all the time. There are literally scores of individuals in Washington, and elsewhere, who during those years gave their time and energy – sometimes at personal risk – to help provide information vital to our country's security. Of course you don't know who they are because they never, ever talked about what they did, not even to their friends and colleagues – never gave a speech about it, and never published op-ed essays about it even if they thought the resulting Reagan policies were wrong-headed. They understood that in taking on an assignment for the CIA – however brief, however informal – they were expected to keep their mouths shut.

In Person or “Eyes Only”

When we had our answer to the top official's query – whether it took us an hour or a month – that answer went to Casey himself, who would review it personally to be sure it was an adequate response. Because the President, the Vice President, and the Secretaries of State and Defense were the CIA's primary customers, Casey considered it his personal responsibility to oversee the agency's responses to their queries. Usually, Casey himself would deliver the response in person. Other times it would be delivered in the form of a top-secret, “Eyes-Only” memo from him to the official.

All this raises two important questions for George Tenet, who was Director of Central Intelligence during all the time that “Plamegate” was going on:

- Why did the CIA, under your direction, treat the Vice President’s query about Iraqi efforts to purchase yellowcake in Niger so casually?
- When Joe Wilson started blabbing in public about his CIA mission to Niger – and lying about what he reported to the CIA upon his return – why didn’t you say something rather than allow the President’s credibility to be shredded?

These days George Tenet – to whom President Bush inexplicably awarded the Medal of Freedom, our country’s highest civilian honor – is raking in a fortune on the lecture circuit. Perhaps someone in his next audience will take the opportunity to ask these questions and insist on answers – which is more than any of the hot-shot reporters in Washington seems interested in doing.

*Herbert E. Meyer served during the Reagan Administration as Special Assistant to the Director of Central Intelligence and Vice Chairman of the CIA’s National Intelligence Council. His [DVD](#) on *The Siege of Western Civilization* has become an international best-seller.*

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