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## UFO Report Poses Credibility Risk For the CIA

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Is the sun finally setting on the CIA?

Web-posted: Wednesday, August 6, 1997

WASHINGTON -- A recently released CIA report on UFOs poses a credibility risk for the CIA.

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Like a similar report released by the Air Force last spring, the CIA's report has the effect of asking UFO fanatics: "Who are you going to believe . . . us or your own eyes?"

These days I am willing to bet more people believe in flying saucers than in the Central Intelligence Agency.

And, once you begin to see why, you are led to larger questions: Why do we still have a CIA and do we need to keep it?

The declassified report, "CIA's Role in the Study of UFOs," is available on the CIA's Internet Web page. The Air Force made "misleading and deceptive statements to the public" about UFO sightings from the late 1950s through the 1960s to cover up test flights of the U-2 and SR-71 (Blackbird) spy planes, according to the report.

"While perhaps justified, this deception added fuel to the later conspiracy theories and the cover-up controversy of the 1970s," Gerald K. Haines, the report's author, writes.

This new report probably will add even more fuel, even though the government has much less reason to lie to us now that the Cold War is over. But that only raises another question: If the Cold War is over, why do we need the CIA?

The Cold War was President Harry S. Truman's justification for forming the CIA in 1947. But the war is over now. The government no longer has to lie about secret weapons that were intended to beat back the spread of world communism.

Yet, its little UFO report, released decades after it would make a difference in United States-Soviet relations, only highlights the volumes of documents that remain secret. By the beginning of this year, a year after President Clinton ordered a widespread declassification of government documents, the CIA had declassified only 19,600 pages of 165.9 million pages that were subject to the order, according to "Is the CIA Necessary," a review of government documents by Theodore Draper in the Aug. 14 New York Review of Books.

So, why do we still need a CIA? Recent CIA directors have raised that question and failed to answer it with anything more than vague generalities. Like his predecessors, CIA director George Tenet cited crime, terrorism and nuclear proliferation as possible substitutes for the Soviet threat in his confirmation hearings. But each of these problems and more already are dealt with by more than a dozen other agencies that gather intelligence, according to Tenet and his predecessor, John M. Deutch, who served in 1995 and 1996.

So, why pick on the CIA? For one thing, it stands out among intelligence agencies in its penchant for mischief-making, also known as "covert actions," with varying degrees of success and failure against governments our government didn't like in Cuba, Iran, Guatemala, Afghanistan, Nicaragua and elsewhere.

The San Jose Mercury-News partly retreated from its startling allegations last year of a CIA conspiracy to fund the Nicaraguan contras by funneling cocaine into American ghettos. But, the controversy highlighted as never before, particularly for African-Americans, something Senate reports revealed earlier: In their zeal to block communism, CIA officers allowed planeloads of cocaine to flow into American streets.

The CIA's survival rests on an enduring cult of secrecy, a residual national fear like that of bombing victims who don't want to emerge from their shelters after the bombing has ended.

As a result, secrecy remains a booming business. Some 2 million federal employees in 29 departments and agencies, plus another million people in private industry, can classify information, according to "Secrecy," a recent report by the Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy, chaired by Sen. Daniel P. Moynihan (D-N.Y.)

Many of these "secrets" come from "open sources" such as books, newspapers and public broadcasts. "The classification system . . . is used too often to deny the public an understanding of the policymaking process, rather than for the necessary protection of intelligence activities and other highly sensitive matters," the commission found.

A democratic society should be rigorously stingy about removing decision-makers from public accountability. We have met the enemy and it is the "classified" stamp.

Sometimes government secrets are necessary. The CIA isn't. The sun has set on its usefulness. If it cannot justify itself, it should declare victory, bring its spies in from the cold and close up shop.

That won't end the cult of secrecy, but it could mark a beginning of the end.

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