Many years ago I was given the job of making the final payment to a foreign diplomat who had worked as a recruited agent for the CIA. With the man's retirement, his covert relationship with the agency was ending. The old agent was in an expansive mood when we met, and he told me how much he valued his work for the CIA, not just because it had paid for his children's educations. The information he had passed along about his country and resulting U.S. actions "had stopped us from doing all kinds of stupid things," he said.

Today, such a conversation would be unlikely for many reasons, chief among them the current reputations of the CIA and of the United States itself. Our bungling of intelligence assessments before the invasion of Iraq and our mismanagement of the occupation; our continued unwillingness to talk to those with whom we disagree; and other missteps, including the mishandling and destruction of detainee interrogation tapes, have shrouded the White House, the Pentagon and CIA headquarters in an aura of incompetence.

In the name of the "war on terror," we have abandoned the moral high ground on issues such as prisoner detention, torture and rendition. The Bush administration has become so obsessed by the Sept. 11 attacks that, as former deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage puts it, we are exporting fear, not hope.

The targets and primary requirements of intelligence agencies change with time. Today's targets are tougher and more dangerous than anything I had to deal with. I worked primarily against the Soviets and the Chinese, and violence was rare. Today's case officers put their lives on the line as they pursue al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. The draconian positions taken by the Bush administration make case officers' lives harder, not easier. The nightmarish images from Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo are bitter obstacles to the development of dialogue with potential recruits and make the threat of capture by Muslim fanatics all the more horrendous.

Others who have worked in and studied the intelligence world have suggested taking steps to reinvigorate our intelligence and security community. Earlier this year, Richard Dearlove, the retired director of Britain's MI6 intelligence service, said that at the CIA "there are already solid foundations on which to rebuild" but that this will be a 10-year process. There are no quick fixes, he warned. Tim Weiner, author of the excellent CIA history "Legacy of Ashes," spoke in a television interview of the critical need for talented young people, with linguistic skills and a sense of history, to be willing to contribute years of anonymous service to their country.
Fortunately, such people exist. I frequently talk on college campuses and always refer positively to my 31 years with the CIA. Almost inevitably, a student waits after my talk to quietly express interest in becoming an intelligence officer. I encourage all such young people to learn a foreign language, read history and get some overseas experience.

Within the CIA itself, positive steps are already being taken. The current director has quietly brought back into the service some highly experienced, senior people forced out by his predecessor, Porter Goss. And George Tenet's unfortunate "slam-dunk" remark about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction should not obscure his solid, morale-restoring achievements, particularly in Afghanistan, during his long tenure as CIA director.

The CIA has had many ups and downs during its history. The late Meg Greenfield, the former editorial page editor of The Post, wrote a column in Newsweek, "The CIA Without Romance," in 1975 in which she dismissed former director Allen Dulles (as does Weiner in his book) by saying that "in Dulles the potential for disaster is everywhere apparent." She referred to Bill Colby, then the director, as "presiding over one of the great organizational wrecks of our time, a vast secret intelligence agency that has endured a veritable tornado of blown cover, and which is trying to get in line with a sudden demand for public accountability." (Sound familiar?)

In the end, as Greenfield voiced hope for the CIA's revival, she chose John le Carré's fictional hero, George Smiley, as embodying the key virtues of intelligence work. She wrote: "George Smiley has it all, and has it all just right: a fanatical commitment to the inspection of reality, a corollary distaste for daydream and drama, a willingness to make moral distinctions and an understanding of what the practical limits are." Le Carré was a British intelligence officer who served in Germany in the early days of the Cold War. He knew what he was writing about.

As we move into a new year and further into this tumultuous new century, we will need attributes such as Smiley's to best assess foreign threats. When we at last accurately perceive the nature of terrorist challenges, we will recognize that effectively dealing with them is largely a job for intelligence officers and paramilitary specialists. Such people, skillfully employing the scalpels of deep insight and, if necessary, excision, are far better guardians of our national security and our global reputation than those who indiscriminately wield the broadswords of threat, force, torture and death.

The writer was a career Central Intelligence Agency officer from 1951 to 1982, after which he served as national security adviser to Vice President George H.W. Bush, U.S. ambassador to South Korea and chairman of the Korea Society.

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