CIA reforms flawed say academics

Richard Higgins

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The CIA's recent moves to ease restrictions on secret research have failed to satisfy many in the academic community, according to several scholars and university officials.

The CIA is moving In the right direction, the scholars and officials said, but its reforms are largely symbolic gestures that fall short of greater openness.

Last month. Robert Gates, the CIA's deputy director for intelligence, said the agency would no longer require scholars to submit CIA-sponsored research for review before publication unless it involved classified information. The agency also said it would waive, with some exceptions, Its demand that CIA backing be kept secret.

He also announced, in a reference to a controversy at Harvard University last fall, that participants in CIA-backed conferences will be told in advance of the agency connections.

The changes, announced tn a speech at Harvard that drew nationwide attention, were greeted warmly as a positive si$i of change by many in the small audience of professors.

Since then, many scholars have said the broad exemptions to the new rules may make them potentially insignificant.

The conditions under which CIA support can still be kept secret include if the scholar wishes It to be or If the CIA determines that "public association of CIA with a specific topic or subject would prove damaging to the United States."

Gates gave three examples of reasons against disclosure of CIA support: If that could give rise to "difficulty with a foreign govern* ment ... the possibility that acknowledged CIA interest in a specific subject ... could affect the situation itself and ... concern that readers might assume the scholar's conclusions were. In fact, CIA's."

Joseph S. Nye, Jr., a Harvard government professor, followed Gates and told the audience, "You've jusbheard a bureaucracy move." Last week re said how far the CIA moved is unclear. "If the changes are interpreted narrowly, they could be significant. If they're interpreted broadly, they could be trivial."

Others were harsher. "The loopholes are so gigantic that Just about anything could fall Into them," said professor Richard Cottam, a University of Pittsburgh specialist in Iranian politics who worked for the CIA until 1958. "They still give the CIA carte blanche to disclose what it wants."

Moreover. Gates failed to address the basic conflict between the idea of openness and CIA-sponsored research, Cottam said.

"Our primary role is assumption-challenging, not assumption-confirming. The scholar who accepts sponsored research is aware, at least subconsciously, of the CIA's implicit assumptions. In order to validate his analysis in the eyes of his sponsor, he often winds up accepting those assumptions."

Derek C. Bok, Harvard's president, was also skeptical. "I am not convinced that the changes are significant," he said in a statement. Bok recently convened a special committee to review the ethics of CIA work done by scholars, and whether Harvard's guidelines on the subject are adequate and well-understood.

Gates's 12-page speech, excerpts of which were published in the Globe and The New York Times, defended the CIA's recent effort to expand its contacts with academics as vital to exposing the agency to divergent viewpoints.

Dale F. Eickelman, a New York University anthropologist who has researched scholarly ethics, said the reforms are not satisfactory because the CIA can "use the overly broad escape clause" of national security to conceal almost anything.

"As far as I'm concerned, it's back to business as usual," he said.

Marvin Zonis, a University of Chicago professor who formerly headed tts Center for Middle Eastern Studies, said Gates' reforms also do not address a basic problem for area-studies scholars — that they may "undermine their credibility as researchers," and even sabotage their own field work. If they are publicly linked with the CIA.

Stansfield Turner, a former director of the agency, defended the reforms and said CIA sponsorship is no different from the huge amount of corporate sponsorship of academic research.

The rule changes are "significant and commendable" and needn't "go any further." he said. "The critics can't have it both ways. They can't accuse the CIA of being unaware of changing trends, and be unwilling to stimulate that awareness."

John Womack, a Harvard history professor, called the reforms "trivial except that they signify the CIA's increasingly effective cooperation with academics." Womack said the CIA was "apparently trying to make it easier for academics to stay within what might loosely be called scholarly ethics."

Alex Dallln, head of Stanford University's Center for Russian and East European Studies. said. "It's fine as a general statement, but in practice the CIA can always find a security reason for Imposing secrecy, so this doesn't change much.

John Shattuck, vice president for public affairs at Harvard University, said the CIA was "moving In the right direction" but "dldn'i go very far In these proposals. The exceptions are so broad as to swallow any rule of disclosure."

Although the CIA will henceforth limit' its prepublication review of texts based on CIA research "to the specific subject area in which a scholar had classified information," Shattuck said the issue still poses a basic problem for academics.

In addition, the rules, as stated, do not block the CIA from asking to review subsequent writings on a subject for which the author once had access to classified data, Shattuck noted.

"It doesn't clear up the problem of academic freedom. You'd still have scholars engaged in classified research having to submit their papers for review before publication. If the CIA needs to have classified research done, far better It be done in house than in a university setting. In that sense, the Gates speech really doesn't get to the bottom line."

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<cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp90-00806r000100030006-1>