



Gore Rejected C.I.A. Evidence of Russian Corruption

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When the Central Intelligence Agency uncovered what its analysts considered to be conclusive evidence of the personal corruption of Prime Minister Viktor S. Chernomyrdin of Russia in 1995, they sent it to the White House, expecting Clinton Administration officials to be impressed with their work.

Instead, when the secret C.I.A. report on Mr. Chernomyrdin arrived in the office of Vice President Al Gore, it was rejected and sent back to the C.I.A. with a barnyard epithet scrawled across its cover, according to several intelligence officials familiar with the incident.

At C.I.A. headquarters in Langley, Va., the message seemed clear: The Vice President did not want to hear allegations that Mr. Chernomyrdin was corrupt and was not interested in further intelligence reports on the matter.

As a result, C.I.A. analysts say they are now censoring themselves. When, for instance, the agency found that it cost a German business executive \$1 million just to get a meeting with Mr. Chernomyrdin to discuss deals in Russia, it decided not to circulate the report outside the C.I.A., officials said.

Mr. Gore, who held regular talks with Mr. Chernomyrdin that became an important channel for relations with Russia, declined to comment on the handling of the report. "I never discuss top-secret documents," Mr. Gore said in an interview.

Yet a senior aide to Mr. Gore said his office always wants more intelligence, not less. "The real attitude around here about intelligence is, can't do business without it," the aide said.

But that was not the lesson learned at the C.I.A. The incident has fostered a perception in the agency's ranks that the Administration is dismissive of "inconvenient" intelligence about corruption among the Russian leaders with whom White House and State Department officials have developed close personal relationships.

These complaints seem unrealistic to the White House and foreign policy officials who insist that they could not allow allegations of corruption to deter them from working with the Russian leadership on a range of issues, from curbing the spread of weapons to increasing American trade with Russia. Some add that making corruption among the Russian leadership a high priority would be a losing battle.

"What does the C.I.A. want us to do, not deal with the Prime Minister of Russia?" a senior Administration official said.

This disagreement between the C.I.A. and the White House has flared during Russia's economic crisis, and C.I.A. officials argue that the White House should be more interested in unvarnished information about corruption in Moscow, especially as the United States and other nations were trying to determine whether Russia deserved billions' more in Western aid money.

Instead, these critics say the Administration seems willing to try to deal with the crisis with one eye closed.

"They never want to hear this stuff," complained an intelligence official who asked not to be identified. Another said: "They don't ignore it. But they don't want to have to act on it."

Several senior Administration officials acknowledged in interviews that they had received a number of reports from the C.I.A. alleging corruption by Mr. Chernomyrdin, who was ousted as Prime Minister in March and made an unsuccessful bid to return to the post this fall. Officials also say the agency has submitted many other reports alleging corruption among other senior Russian leaders, including Anatoly B. Chubais, who until recently was considered by Administration officials to be one of their closest and most important Russian allies on economic reform.

But the Administration officials contend that the C.I.A. reports never contained enough evidence to prompt them to distance themselves from Mr. Chernomyrdin, Mr. Chubais or other senior Russian officials who had become important counterparts in diplomatic and economic relations.

In fact, several Administration officials were dismissive of the C.I.A. reports, saying they were often inconclusive and thinly sourced. Those officials also said that they had frequently asked the C.I.A. for more conclusive proof, but that the agency never delivered.

"To my knowledge, they have never presented us with a smoking gun," an Administration official said. "I would describe some of the agency's material as being in the realm of rumor."

C.I.A. officials counter that the Administration established impossibly high standards of proof to make it easier for the White House and State Department officials to dismiss their reports.

"These people have expected something no one in the intelligence community could provide -- judicial burden of proof,' an agency official said. "Did we have an authenticated videotape of the person actually receiving a bribe? No. But reporting from established, reliable sources was written off as 'vague and unsubstantiated.' "

Agency analysts refused to describe much of the classified evidence they provided the Administration against Mr. Chernomyrdin and Mr. Chubais. But they insisted that it was more detailed and conclusive than allegations of bribery and insider dealing than have been made in the Russian media and elsewhere.

In response, Andrei Trapeznikov, a spokesman for Mr. Chubais in Moscow, complained that if the C.I.A. had evidence against Mr. Chubais, the agency should make it public.

"If they have something, they should tell it officially," said Mr. Trapeznikov, head of press relations for Unified Energy Systems, the Moscow company where Mr. Chubais is now president. "We haven't seen these reports."

Told that Administration officials had been dismissive of much of the C.I.A. reporting, Mr. Trapeznikov said, "I think that shows the situation."

Mr. Chernomyrdin was unavailable for comment, and his staff refused to discuss the matter when reached in Moscow.

The Administration never even paid much attention to the many allegations that have been made publicly against both men over the last several years. Mr. Chubais, unpopular in Russia for his management of the economic reforms, was ousted from the Yeltsin Government for a time last year after reports that he and four other Government officials had each accepted \$90,000 in advances for a proposed book on the country's privatization efforts. The publisher was partly owned by a bank that had made several successful bids in privatization sales.

The privatization program itself has also been at the center of charges of insider dealing benefiting a handful of the new Russian oligarchs.

Meanwhile, Mr. Chernomyrdin, the former head of Russia's huge natural gas monopoly, Gazprom, has been publicly accused of using his influence over Gazprom's privatization program to make himself one of the country's richest men. His personal fortune has been estimated to be as high as \$5 billion, his Russian critics have said.