Careers insider offers unique perspective on the CIA

By Glenn C. Altschuler

Soon after Sept. 11, 2001, CIA director George Tenet began to preside over a daily session in which senior agency officials reviewed the latest developments in the war against Al Qaeda. As he watched the “preternatural calm and the thoroughness” of his colleagues, John Rizzo thought to himself: “If the American people could only see this, they would be so proud and reassured.”

In “Company Man,” a memoir of his 34-year career at the CIA, seven of them as its chief legal officer, John Rizzo takes readers deep inside Langley, the storied, suburban D.C. headquarters of the agency. Informatively, mordantly witty and self-deprecating, his book provides a unique perspective on the CIA’s involvement in drafting “Presidential Findings” (written justification for covert actions); the Iran-contra hearings; and the use of “dirty assets” (unsavory individuals) as informants.

Rizzo reveals fascinating details about the publication of books by journalists Tim Weiner, James Risen, and Ron Suskind, each of which included material classified as top secret. Most revealingly, Rizzo examines the crafting and implementation of rules governing “enhanced interrogation techniques.”

The “Company Man” is aptly titled. Rizzo praises every one of the 11 directors of the CIA under whom he served and virtually all of the colleagues he mentions. And his assessment of politicians, policies, and practices is determined by his identification with the agency.

For instance, Rizzo rebukes Bill Clinton because he “wasn’t interested in, didn’t care about, the Agency at all.” On the other hand he admires George W. Bush — “now, that’s a stand-up guy” — because, rather than hiding behind “plausible deniability,” Bush went out of his way to declare that he was involved in the creation of counterterrorist techniques.

Rizzo also claims that he became convinced that the program “was the necessary and the right thing to do” because “[e]very, and I mean every, career CIA employee who was involved in it believed in it wholeheartedly and unswervingly.” Although some of them “harbored views on the liberal side of the political spectrum,” he writes, and all of them knew “they were going down a road” paved with personal and professional peril, none of them “ever wavered.”

He maintains that the CIA has never “countenanced much less facilitated” torture, “one of the most repellent words in the English language”: it is not “an acceptable or even unavoidable by-product of carrying out the mission.”

Nonetheless, as Rizzo notes, many Americans, including Barack Obama, do not agree. During the presidential campaign of 2008, Obama singled out waterboarding as “torture.” In an executive order issued three days after taking office, he ended the EIT program.

Rizzo retired in 2009. “The Agency needed a clean break from the past,” he concluded, “and I represented the past.”

He does not hesitate, however, to peer into the future with an “insider’s” prediction that ought to command our attention. Rizzo does not think the CIA will ever again engage in “any sort of even mildly coercive interrogation practices.” Since it is “far less legally risky” to kill a terrorist than capture, interrogate, or try him, he believes that future presidents will not hesitate to order deadly drone strikes — and the CIA will “be in the middle of it, without hesitation or resistance.”

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