Tinker tailor envoy spyFor the first time, a career diplomat is to lead the CIA

William Burns is swapping soft power for a cloak and dagger

The Economist, January 11, 2021

“IN MUSIC, conductors ensure that all the instruments of an orchestra come together,” reflected William Burns in “The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for its Renewal”. In foreign policy, he wrote, “diplomats similarly harness all the tools of American statecraft—from the soft power of ideas, culture, and public diplomacy, to...intelligence-gathering and covert action”. As a diplomat for 33 years, rising to become deputy secretary of state under Barack Obama, Mr Burns wielded the ideas. Now he will try his hand at the darker arts as President-elect Joe Biden’s nominee for director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

It is not unusual for an outsider to be put in charge of the CIA. Of the past ten directors, stretching back to the mid-1990s, seven came from outside the agency’s headquarters in Langley, Virginia. That included a smattering of generals and a string of politicians, the most recent being Mike Pompeo, Donald Trump’s first CIA director and the current secretary of state. Yet in its 73 years, the CIA has never been led by a career diplomat like Mr Burns, let alone one widely regarded as a “titan of the foreign-policy world”, as Marc Polymeropolous, a former CIA officer who retired in 2019, puts it. Mr Burns, he says, will be a “very popular choice amongst both analysts and operators”.

The choice is revealing. Mr Biden considered appointing Michael Morell, a veteran CIA analyst who was the agency’s acting director in 2011 and 2012-13, or David Cohen, a former Treasury official who was deputy director in 2015-17, among other insiders. Both would have been welcomed by the CIA’s workforce. That he plumped for Mr Burns suggests not only that he wants new thinking in America’s most prestigious intelligence agency but also seeks to put diplomats back in the driving seat of foreign policy.

That chimes with Mr Burns’s instincts. In “Back Channel”, published in 2019, he wrote that “American diplomacy was unsettled before Trump. Decades of unbalanced investment in defence and intelligence had taken its toll.” He had a point. Though the CIA has swashbuckling origins in the wartime Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and a notorious cold-war record of gun-running and coup-making, its core mission is supposed to be recruiting human agents abroad, and then analysing the resulting intelligence.

Yet during the “global war on terror” after 2001, the CIA tilted heavily towards paramilitary operations, sending officers into Afghanistan on horseback and operating a global network of armed drones. Even when the aim was to recruit agents, rather than kill terrorists, the demands of doing so inside war zones changed the ethos of the profession. “There was a perceptible change in the culture inside the agency...buzz-cuts seemed to appear everywhere,” wrote Alex Finley, a pseudonymous former CIA officer, in 2017. “Much of the institutional knowledge about running traditional espionage operations...is gone.”

Though counter-terrorism subsided under Mr Trump, there was “a marked increase in covert action programs,” according to Mr Polymeropolous and Kristin Wood, another former CIA officer. In 2018 the CIA was granted the authority to conduct cyber-operations against Iran and other adversaries, for instance, according to reporting by Yahoo News. Yet covert action took “focus and talent from other core analytic and operational missions”, noted Mr Polymeropolous and Ms Wood. Mr Burns may seek to rebalance these tasks, re-emphasising old-fashioned espionage.

He is also well placed to reorient the CIA more firmly towards the needs of those who consume and act on its intelligence. That will be welcome news at his old stomping ground, the State Department, which hungers for intelligence on, say, the negotiating position of foreign counterparts, as well as for other branches of America’s government. Matt Castelli, another former CIA officer, compares Mr Burns’s nomination to a business “taking a life-long customer of yours, who knows your value proposition better than anyone, and making them CEO.”

Yet if Mr Burns does aim for fewer paramilitary teams in Syria and more dead drops in Beijing and Moscow, that will not be easy. Technology has tightened the constraints on traditional tradecraft. “Years ago, CIA could fabricate a passport as well as a visa, and with a fistful of fifties, go into a country and operate,” recalls John Brennan, a career CIA officer who led the agency in 2013-17. A combination of biometric border controls, facial recognition and digital tracking has changed all that.

“It was still challenging, but you didn’t have to deal with all the CCTV and the digital dust and all of the technical abilities for [foreign intelligence] services to track your movements,” rues Mr Brennan—who points out that telling an undercover CIA officer to leave their phone in the embassy can be awkwardly revealing if every bona fide diplomat blithely carries theirs out. Tackling these problems will require a different approach to espionage—embedding more intelligence officers in private businesses rather than embassies, for instance—but also a technological overhaul. The CIA is “woefully behind the private sector’s cutting-edge technology,” note Mr Polymeropolous and Ms Wood.

Then there is the question of what to spy on. In a video message after his nomination, Mr Burns hints at the gamut of issues that await him. “The CIA and America's other national security institutions have to reimagine their roles on an international landscape that's profoundly different from the world I encountered as a young diplomat,” he says. “Familiar threats”, like terrorism and nuclear proliferation, compete with “increasingly powerful challenges”, such as climate change and global public health. “The shock of the pandemic that we’ve been living through is going to drive people to say: hey, we don't want that to happen again so what can intelligence be doing to help us?” says Larry Pfeiffer, a former chief of staff to a CIA director and now head of the Hayden Centre, a think-tank.

Mr Burns does not mention what many intelligence officials view as the most formidable challenge of all. In August a former CIA officer became the agency’s latest employee to be charged with espionage on behalf of the Chinese government. In November another officer was sentenced to 19 years in prison after passing secrets to China that enabled it to kill or jail around 20 American informants. In the past two years at least four American intelligence officers have been accused of working for Chinese services. Although America’s own successes inside China are a matter of conjecture, the apparent scale of this Chinese penetration, along with the shredding of America’s own networks inside China, suggest that Mr Burns has rebuilding to do.