

Dump William Webster before the summit

by Jeffrey Steinberg

If President Bush wishes to demonstrate his “personal diplomatic” skills at the Dec. 2-3 Malta summit with Soviet President Gorbachov, he would do well to replace his current director of the Central Intelligence Agency well before he sets sail for the Mediterranean.

Since trading in his FBI director’s chair for that of America’s chief intelligence officer, Judge William Webster has racked up a series of intelligence failures and bad judgment calls that qualify him for immediate induction into the Bloopers’ Hall of Fame. Moreover, his problem does not seem to lie with the boys at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. According to recent accounts in the *Washington Post* and elsewhere, Judge Webster spends so little time at the CIA’s headquarters that no one there knows whence or from whom he is getting his intelligence briefings. Some intelligence community oldtimers refer to him as the “101st senator”—a reference to the fact that he spends a tremendous amount of time up on Capitol Hill courting his Democratic Party backers.

Webster’s most memorable intelligence miss occurred last spring as events began to explode in the People’s Republic of China. His information on the situation inside the P.R.C. was so off that he failed to foresee the mass student upsurge, and when the Tiananmen Square massacre did take place, he tried to downplay the role of Deng Xiaoping, just hours before Deng surfaced publicly to claim credit for the slaughter. That gaffe was compounded by the fact that President Bush had gone public with Webster’s version of the events.

On Sept. 19, Webster delivered a major public speech before the World Affairs Council in Los Angeles in which he said that the prime focus of U.S. national security concerns has shifted away from the Soviet Union, and toward economic competitors of the United States, such as Japan. It was Webster’s implicit view, that greedy industrialists in Japan and West Germany and Third World dictators are seeking to bust up the superpower harmony by weakening the United States economically.

Proceeding from that oddball geopolitical world map, one might have at least expected Webster to be “Johnny on the spot” when the CIA was approached in September to give aid and comfort to coup plotters to overthrow Panama’s Gen. Manuel Noriega. But Webster was nowhere in sight, off on a European junket. Nobody from CIA was even present at the White House Situation Room as that crisis unfolded.

Webster’s playing the “innocent abroad,” as the Panama coup plot fizzled, may yet prove to be the crowning accomplishment of his tenure as Director of Central Intelligence.

Judge Webster’s latest problem stems from the fact that recent allegations made by attorneys for Pan American Airlines suggest a coverup of mammoth proportions of the Dec. 20, 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in which 279 people, including at least three CIA officers, perished. Pan Am says that the CIA had advance warning of the planned bombing, but failed to act because its team in Frankfurt, West Germany had been compromised by dealings with a Syrian-backed drug-running ring.

Whether the Pan Am allegations prove to be accurate or not, there seems to be little doubt at this point that the Lockerbie bombing was carried out by agents of the PFLP-General Command, a group more or less run by Syria’s intelligence chief Ali Duba through a “former” Syrian military intelligence service major named Ahmed Jibril. Syria, along with Bulgaria, is Moscow’s chief asset in running international narco-terrorism.

Protecting the CIA’s terrorist assets

Back in the days when Webster was America’s top cop over at the FBI, he rejected the idea altogether that there was a link between terrorists and drug traffickers. More recently, in his new role at the CIA, Webster has sponsored the idea of open collaboration with the KGB in combatting drugs and terrorism, deploying a top adviser, ex-CIA director William Colby, to hold private talks with senior KGB officials during a week-long seminar at the Rand Corporation in Santa Monica, California in September. Back in February, he enthusiastically pushed CIA collaboration with the KGB, supposedly to crack the Pan Am 103 case.

He is still sticking to his guns on the issue of CIA-KGB collusion. On Friday, Nov. 3, as the first reports of the Pan Am accusations were being surfaced by Rep. James Traficant (D-Oh.) at a crowded Capitol Hill press conference, Webster turned to the *Washington Post* to give him front-page “damage control” coverage in an impromptu interview in which he blamed everyone from West German and British intelligence to the American media for the failure to come up with the Pan Am 103 culprits.

Webster is now caught up in a potentially damaging coverup of Soviet client-state Syria’s hand in the biggest international terrorist incident in years. This is a pretty sorry state of affairs for President Bush, as the latter prepares his upcoming summit with Moscow’s cagey chief of state. An awful lot of benefits might thus be derived as the summit rapidly approaches if the President moves to dump Judge Webster and replace him with a seasoned intelligence professional who at least knows enough to remain skeptical about Moscow’s expressed intentions, and who has at least read the files on Syria’s well-known role as Moscow’s leading narco-terrorist surrogate.