Americans were glued to the TV screens the last night of April. George Tenet gave his first live interview. On that very day his book about the years at the Central Intelligence Agency, C.I.A., hit the bookshops. „I worked in the shadows my whole life,” the former director of central intelligence told the reporter who exposed some weak parts of the new book. Tenet, who headed the C.I.A. for seven years until July of 2004 during the Clinton and Bush administrations, was not used to quick responds. The Greek American, born in 1953, reveals very little about himself. Likely, the „subliminal man“ as he was dubbed by staffs, will do so in years to come. He might have more time do to this now as professor in the practice of diplomacy at Georgetown University.

The basic question of his tenure at the C.I.A. remained open: why did he, who reported six mornings a week in person to the president, not directly alarm George W. Bush in the mid of 2001 about the imminent danger of an attack on America? Being asked about this in the live show, Tenet said that the president was not the „acting officer“. Tenet would provide only data. Such a direct talk was neither a part of the style nor of the culture. In that uneasy moment Tenet appeared as one of those collective bureaucrats from Eastern European political bureaus that entered talk shows but did not leave the impression of responsible adults. Instead, Tenet, who loved to say „we,“ praised the great comradeship in his spy service. All in all, his share at America’s biggest debacle since the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor remained in the dark. But other than those „we“ figures he got four million dollars advance for his book. Are the huge mistakes being rewarded in this democracy?

And what about his words, that the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq is a „slum dunk case?“ In his book he talks about Iraq’s programs and potentials to produce them. This might surely have been the case. But he and the Bush administration sold this assumption already as facts of stockpiled arsenals. This was obvious during the speech by foreign secretary Collin Powell to the United Nations. At the beginning of February 2003 before the war against Iraq, Powell left no doubt that Saddam Husain had the ability to produce weapons of mass destruction. Tenet, who sat behind Powell that day, reveals that this misleading speech was developed by his agency. Still, vice president Dick Cheney pointed at Tenet’s „slum dunk“ remarks on the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks for having been a reason to invade Iraq. Recently foreign minister Rice protected Tenet by telling the audience that not only the C.I.A. but all the big intelligence services where wrong.

Tenet defends his words in the book. They were taken out of context, he maintains. And „slum dunk“ was not the main reason for going to war. Rather, Tenet’s often quoted remarks came „ten months after the president saw the first workable war plan for Iraq.” To be fair, the change of regime as possible war aim was written in presidential papers already in 1991: „Should Iraq resort to using chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons, be found supporting terrorist acts against U.S. or coalition partners anywhere in the world, or destroy Kuwait’s oil fields, it shall become an explicit objective of the United States to replace the current leadership of Iraq.“¹ In this light Tenet’s book shows that the second Bush administration tried to fulfill what the first had not accomplished. Thus, the war against Iraq became at a certain point inevitable. Or as Tenet used to put it: „Saddam was bluffing, we where not.”

Tenet is also correct in saying that America did not only go to war for those weapons but for strategic considerations as well. The weapons of mass destruction though were the one point every one could publicly agree on, Tenet underscores. In other words: this was the catch phrase for convincing many to go

to war. However, it was produced by Tenet as C.I.A. director.

Of course, those and other phrases - „We do not torture.“ - leave deep doubts with the reader. How can such shadow warriors like George Tenet be democratically controlled? This raises also questions about his development and job qualification. On the point of water boarding - a form of torture to obtain information and to coerce confessions - he tells us that he would „not talk about techniques.“ In a way it is good that his book advances the controversy on gray zones and security dilemmas. According to Tenet this „enhanced interrogation“ had saved so far thousands of lives by foiling already some terror attempts.

Tenet’s book is surely not the last word in current history. Middle East historians will probe his allegations. Well written, it offers a filtered view on him and his insights (and those of his organization for it was censored by the C.I.A.) at a most critical time of the Millennium. The reader might draw two conclusions. First, as a citizen one should stay doubtful toward information delivered by secret services and should always try to verify them.

Second, also in secret bureaucracies floats the poison of routine and cowardice: some of those who are chosen to guard the democracy are getting a bigger taste for their career and self advancement than for their very task. Some sentences in this book are typical for this. Instead of having alarmed the president and the public, they were ticking like little gearwheels in a clock. That is why eleven former fellow officers blame Tenet now in a public appeal. They accuse him of his silence as the opposite behavior was badly needed. They say he should have spoken out far earlier against the White House’s push to invade Iraq.

But this is only George Tenet’s second important mistake. The foremost one leads us to one person of similar rank. Do you remember Richard A. Clarke? He served as the head of the counter terror unit in the White House during the Clinton and part of the Bush administrations. Like Tenet he watched the unfolding danger in the summer of 2001. And like him he did not resign raising red flags. What is more, both did not develop a real understanding about the Middle East and Islam. One can only wonder why a country with such a quantity of institutions and colleges dealing with Middle Eastern affairs had no or only a few experts at the right places to produce also a higher quality of foreign relations. Thus, the clash of civilizations and cultures is surely a problem for several generations to come. With Tenet’s opinion book (and with those by Boob Woodward) at hand we know a little bit more about how the events unfolded from an insider’s perspective. What we have learned here is not very encouraging for the current state of affairs in the United States.

Annotations:


2 http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/types=rezbuecher&id=4816