by Lloyd S. Etheredge¹

Many years ago, Clark Clifford was interviewed in the Academy Award-winning film, Hearts and Minds, that explored the American involvement in the Vietnam War. While he was the Secretary of Defense who helped to reverse President Johnson's policy, Clifford asserted a share of guilt about his previous views and support for the war: "I couldn't have been more wrong," he said.

It was a masterful performance, sincere and convincing. Yet we know - today - that Clifford was playing a role. In his recent memoirs, he confirms that he had privately opposed the Vietnam War from an early date; Lyndon Johnson had even invited him to debate the escalation decision, against Robert McNamara, at private meetings at Camp David. In the earlier movie, for political purposes, Clifford merely assumed a role of guilt.

Today, in the BCCI scandal, are Clark Clifford and Robert Altman guilty? Or has there been - once again - a masterful performance, covering a deeper truth?

We know that BCCI had an open reputation, within the American intelligence community and elsewhere, as the "known bank of drug dealers and terrorists." Clifford - in addition to his wide Washington connections and extraordinary lifelong instincts to guard his reputation - also was a former Chairman of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board that oversaw all CIA and other covert activities. The reputation of his new clients would have been known to Clifford - and thus there is a mystery about why he would have dealt with them.

But consider - if you were a CIA Director and knew BCCI was the "known bank of drug dealers and terrorists," what would you do? You would infiltrate it at every level. The National Security Agency would be assigned to tap its computer links. You would have a duplicate set of its books at CIA Headquarters. And you would know where every penny of the "drug dealers and terrorists" of the world was kept, where and when the money moved, to whom it was paid, and you would probably arrange to photograph and follow everyone withdrawing funds from the accounts, and their own chains of contacts.

If so, we may be witnessing an extraordinary dis-information campaign, masterfully created. Clark Clifford's involvement may not be what it has seemed. If you wanted to assure credibility and effective control, what better way than to have the drug dealers and

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terrorists believe they were safe? That they had readily bought the very highest levels of influence and protection, that even Clark Clifford worked for them?

By this scenario, Clark Clifford and Robert Altman - who personally interviewed (we are told) every senior appointee - were not working for BCCI but creating a cover for one of the most interesting and effective intelligence operations of recent decades.

Did William Casey's mind work this way? You bet! The true story may not be CIA incompetence - observing BCCI's operation, merely handwringing about it, and remaining silent while it extended its operations into American institutions. Rather the true story may be a spectacular success that conned the world's greatest con artists and has created a fully detailed map with such insight that the nature of the gambit cannot be responsibly revealed or even suggested.

And, indeed, there may be good reasons to remain silent, and retain the pretense of bumbling incompetence and moral corruption. How many agents still are in place? How many computers still are fully bugged, in every building, with multiple fallback circuits? How many infiltrated agents have undertaken career moves to other banks in the chain, assuring that duplicate records of every "secret" bank account of drug dealers and terrorists in the world are open reading? Why panic these con artists, and force their withdrawal from the international banking system, when you can still read their every move?

And thus, by this scenario, Clifford and Altman play a role, a cover-story. The role may have a degree of unjustified pain, to be sure - William Casey may not have disclosed, fully, all of the facts to the men he enrolled. But in the long run - when the new information nets run dry, no recruited agents are in jeopardy, and more facts emerge - it may prove to be a role of honor. Clifford's common mea culpa, "I could not have been more wrong," may be judged, in both cases, a statesmanlike performance.

Is <u>all</u> press coverage, then, a deliberate cover story? Probably not: the rush to believe the worst, moral corruption and CIA incompetence, needs only a nudge. The plan may have taken on a life of its own, with genuine offenses alongside the extraordinary monetary rewards. And perhaps, too, New York prosecutors are not part of the team.

However, an inquiry should not wait the judgment of history, decades in the future. Appropriate Congressional committees need to review - at least behind closed doors - the history, now, to make judgments about what really happened, and whether the CIA's incompetence is as deep as the news accounts now imply.

Suppose William Casey (or Mr. Gates and the numerous professionals who continue to serve at the CIA) knew BCCI was the "bank of drug dealers and terrorists" and did nothing? If there was no aggressive and competent infiltration plan - when it was their

job to monitor drug dealers and terrorists? If Clark Clifford, the former head of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board - and other prominent Americans - were being suborned or drawn into a compromising relationship and becoming open to blackmail, with no effective warning being given? If there was no higher strategic rationale to withhold information from the FBI and other regulatory agencies? Truly, it would be frightening - in American agencies spending \$30 billion/year - to recognize such an apparently-continuing level of institutional incompetence and irresponsibility.

The Congressional oversight committees have serious questions to ask; and the task needs to begin.