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Colleagues Say C.I.A. Analyst Played by the Rules

By DAVID S. CLOUD
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WASHINGTON, April 22 — In 1998, when President [Bill Clinton](#) ordered military strikes against a suspected chemical weapons factory in Sudan, Mary O. McCarthy, a senior intelligence officer assigned to the White House, warned the president that the plan relied on inconclusive intelligence, two former government officials say.

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Ms. McCarthy's reservations did not stop the attack on the factory, which was carried out in retaliation for [Al Qaeda's](#) bombing of two American embassies in East Africa. But they illustrated her willingness to challenge intelligence data and methods endorsed by her bosses at the [Central Intelligence Agency](#).

On Thursday, the C.I.A. fired Ms. McCarthy, 61, accusing her of leaking information to reporters about overseas prisons operated by the agency in the years since the Sept. 11 attacks. But despite Ms. McCarthy's independent streak, some colleagues who worked with her at the White House and other offices during her intelligence career say they cannot imagine her as a leaker of classified information.

As a senior National Security Council aide for intelligence from 1996 to 2001, she was responsible for guarding some of the nation's most important secrets.

"We're talking about a person with great integrity who played by the book and, as far as I know, never deviated from the rules," said Steven Simon, a security council aide in the Clinton administration who worked closely with Ms. McCarthy.

Others said it was possible that Ms. McCarthy — who made a contribution to Senator John Kerry's presidential campaign in 2004 — had grown increasingly disenchanted with the methods adopted by the Bush administration for handling Qaeda prisoners.

Ms. McCarthy, who began attending law school at night several years ago and was preparing to retire from the C.I.A., may have felt she had no alternative but to go to the press.

If in fact Ms. McCarthy was the leaker, Richard J. Kerr, a former C.I.A. deputy director, said, "I have no idea what her motive was, but there is a lot of dissension within the agency, and it seems to be a rather unhappy place." Mr. Kerr called Ms. McCarthy "quite a good, substantive person on the issues I dealt with her on."

Larry Johnson, a former C.I.A. officer who worked for Ms. McCarthy in the agency's Latin America section, said, "It looks to me like Mary is being used as a sacrificial lamb."

Ms. McCarthy did not respond Saturday to e-mail and telephone messages seeking comment.

During her time at the White House, she was known as a low-key professional who paid special attention to preventing leaks of classified information and covert operations, several current and former government officials said. When she disagreed with decisions on intelligence operations, they said, she registered her complaints through internal government channels.

Some former intelligence officials who worked with Ms. McCarthy saw her as a persistent obstacle to aggressive antiterrorism efforts.

"She was always of the view that she would rather not get her hands dirty with covert action," said Michael

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Scheuer, a former C.I.A. official, who said he had been in meetings with Ms. McCarthy where she voiced doubts about reports that the factory had ties to Al Qaeda and was secretly producing substances for chemical weapons.

In the case of the Al Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum, Sudan, her concerns may have been well-founded. Sudanese officials and the plant's owner denied any connection to Al Qaeda.

In the aftermath of the attack, the internal White House debate over whether the intelligence reports about the plant were accurate spilled into the press. Eventually, Clinton administration officials conceded that the hardest evidence used to justify striking the plant was a single soil sample that seemed to indicate the presence of a chemical used in making VX gas.

Ms. McCarthy was concerned enough about the episode that she wrote a formal letter of dissent to President Clinton, two former officials said.

Over the last decade, Ms. McCarthy gradually came to have one foot in the secret world of intelligence and another in the public world of policy.

She went from lower-level analyst working in obscurity at C.I.A. headquarters in Langley, Va., to someone at home "downtown," as Washington is called by agency veterans, where policy is more openly fought over and leaks are far more common.

Though she was a C.I.A. employee for more than 20 years, associates said, her early professional experience was not in the world of spying and covert operations.

After a previous career that one former colleague said included time as a flight attendant, she earned a doctorate in history from the University of Minnesota.

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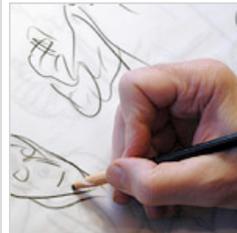
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