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The trial of CIA

Church.

Colby.

Pike.

Not all its covert actions have succeeded, but the agency did manage to outfox Congressional investigators.

By Taylor Branch

There have been enough revelations about the Central Intelligence Agency over the past two years to keep diplomats, prosecutors, reporters and philosophers busy for entire careers. Three separate investigations not only stretched the imagination with show-biz material about cobra venom and deadly skindiving suits but twisted the lens on the American self-image in foreign affairs. The investigations rewrote history—the history, for example, of the relationship between the United States and the Castro Government in Cuba. They showed that the C.I.A., in some 900 foreign interventions over the past two decades, has run secret wars around the globe and has clandestinely dominated foreign governments so thoroughly as to make them virtual client states. In contrast to Watergate, the C.I.A. investigations proved that abuses of power have not been limited to one particular Administration or one political party. They also established facts that few people were prepared to believe—such as that distinguished gentlemen from the C.I.A. hatched assassination plots with Mafia gangsters.

With all these surprises percolating, the most interesting surprise has been largely ignored. And that is how the C.I.A. investigations ceased. The topic faded away so quickly as to make the whole episode look like a fad. Unlike the F.B.I. issue, which has moved to the prosecutors' offices and stayed on the front page, the vaunted trial of the C.I.A. has already become a memory. And the agency itself has survived the scandals with its covert operations intact, if not strengthened.

The collapse of the C.I.A. investigations has been due largely to ineptitude, poor judgment and lack of will on the part of the Congressional committees. But the agency also played a role. Its strategy was flawless. "Those guys really knew what they were doing," says a staff member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence chaired by Frank Church. "I think they defended themselves just like any other agency would, except they're better. They had a whole office set up to deal with us, and I sometimes had the feeling that they ran operations against us like they run them against foreign governments. It was like the C.I.A. station for the Congress instead of for Greece or Vietnam." The story of how they came out ahead of their investigators says a great deal about both the Congress and the agency, and about the problem of reconciling the demands of the superspy with the democracy he is supposed to protect.

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