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NEWSDAY (NY)
12 July 1984

What limits should CIA have?

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WASHINGTON — Should the CIA conduct clandestine paramilitary operations in other nations to destabilize their governments and otherwise meddle in their internal affairs?

Although the CIA has engaged in covert operations in dozens of nations throughout the world for almost four decades, the debate over their legitimacy, propriety and efficacy continues unabated.

A panel of eight experts, assembled here recently by Harper's Magazine to explore the subject, failed to resolve the issue but offered some intriguing new perspectives on the controversial practice.

The CIA insists that a principal requirement of a covert operation is that, by definition, it must be conducted in secrecy — and therein lies a seemingly insoluble conflict for the democracy that sponsors those activities.

"In the CIA, we learned to do things by deceit," says Ralph McGehee, who served in the CIA for 25 years in various Asian posts.

McGehee says the deception extended to congressional briefings that "had nothing to do with reality" but instead were "a complete whitewash job."

That allegation, frequently voiced by other CIA critics, is especially troublesome because failure to fully inform the appropriate officials of the executive and legislative branches of the federal government is nothing less than an abuse of the Constitution.

Former CIA Director William Colby insists, however, that the CIA does not engage in covert activities without approval from higher authority.

"We've had two clear cases where Congress rose up and said stop a covert action, in Angola and Nicaragua," says Colby. "That shows you that covert activities are subject to the will of the American people."

The public, however, invariably is not privy to the information given to a select group of governmental leaders. "Our government — if it's a covert action stimulated and organized by the CIA — consciously lies to the American people," says John Stockwell, who served as a CIA case officer in various African posts for 12 years.

In Angola, where the CIA was "creating support for an operation that was killing people in the Third World," says Stockwell, "the greatest liability (perceived by the CIA) was that the American people would find out the truth."

But Sen. Daniel P. Moynihan, D-N.Y., vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, says "Congress is satisfied that if an act is legal, it need not be public."

What is particularly striking about the CIA's contemporary covert operations, however, is the extent to which they have informally become a matter of public knowledge — a marked departure from the rigid secrecy of earlier decades.

For example, the public did not learn about this country's involvement until many years after the CIA organized and directed the 1953 coup that overthrew the government of Iranian Premier Mohammed Mossadegh.

Similarly, there was no concurrent public knowledge of the CIA's covert operation that toppled the Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman.

Today, however, the CIA's extensive covert operations in Central America have become a legitimate subject of public debate. In addition, experts in the field claim knowledge of other covert activities currently under way in Chad, Libya, Cambodia, Cuba and Afghanistan.

Notwithstanding the CIA's penchant for secrecy, we may have reached an informal accommodation that perpetuates covert operations as an intermediate measure between diplomatic initiatives and military involvement, but requires at least some measure of public disclosure.

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