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Is Covert Action Necessary?

Why not destabilize Nicaragua? The Sandinistas are no friends of ours. They have cozied up to Castro and Brezhnev. They have funneled arms to the leftist rebels in El Salvador. They are building an army larger than they need for their own defense. By example, if nothing else, they pose a threat to right-wing rulers in places like Honduras and Guatemala—bad guys, to be sure, but *our* bad guys, and arguably no worse than the other kind. Which is the lesser evil: to unleash a little thuggery on the Sandinistas, who play by those rules, or to wash our hands of dirty tricks, for fear of getting into deeper trouble?

Why not arm the rebels in Afghanistan? As a matter of fact, we're doing that. Why not make trouble for Muammar Kaddafi? We're doing that, too. Why not send secret financial aid to Solidarity? If we're doing that, most Americans would approve—and would rather not know. There are worse things than covert action. But if a democratic nation is to meddle in the affairs of another country, it must abide by certain rules: don't violate your own principles. Don't make things worse. Don't get caught.

Subversion: The Central Intelligence Agency defines covert action as "any clandestine operation or activity designed to influence foreign governments, organizations, persons or events in support of United States foreign policy." That covers everything from planting a pro-American editorial in a foreign newspaper to staging coups or raising secret armies. Democratic ideals often do not square with covert action. Some conspiracies launched in defense of American democracy end up subverting democracy elsewhere. In Chile, for example, the CIA destabilized the government of an elected president, Salvador Allende, a

Marxist who eventually was deposed and assassinated. But no covert action is a complete success unless it remains a secret, and secrets are hard to keep in an open society. In the case of Chile, the CIA tried to cover up by lying to Congress, and eventually a loyal American, former CIA Director Richard Helms, had to plead no contest to a false-testimony charge. Covert action *can* turn out for the best, but the only truly successful operations run by the CIA are the ones we still don't know about.

Before World War II, intelligence work consisted mostly of gathering information and thwarting enemy spies. The wartime Office of Strategic Services, the CIA's predecessor, broadened the franchise to include propaganda, political action and dirty tricks of almost every description. After the war, the CIA helped the democracies of Western Europe to stave off communist subversion by subsidizing socialists, Christian Democrats and labor unions. In its heyday, which lasted until the mid-1970s, the CIA launched literally thousands of secret programs, most of them low-budget political and propaganda operations. But it didn't hesitate to stage coups and raise private armies, especially in the Third World. There were fiascoes, notably at the Bay of Pigs. Yet the CIA also managed to overthrow leftist regimes in countries like Guatemala and Iran and to wage a long "secret war" in Laos by transforming primitive tribesmen into a surprisingly effective army.

Rebirth: In the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, there was a virtual moratorium on the messier kinds of covert action. CIA operatives were discharged by the hundreds. Congress required that it be informed of every covert action. It was Jimmy Carter, the champion of human rights and open

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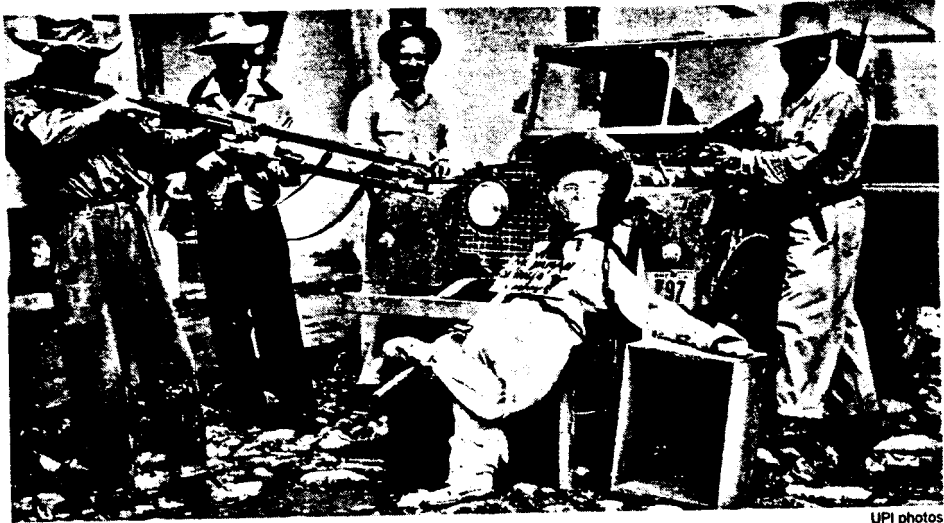
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government, who presided over the rebirth of covert action. With Soviet troops occupying Afghanistan and American diplomats held hostage in Iran, the CIA began to rebuild its secret sources of power and persuasion. In Ronald Reagan's first year, the intelligence budget was increased by 20 percent, but according to one knowledgeable source, the number of clandestine operations has not increased dramatically since Carter left office.

In addition to the Nicaraguan adventure, NEWSWEEK has learned, the CIA is currently running paramilitary operations in about 10 countries, including Afghanistan. The Afghanistan mission involves only a handful of CIA agents, but it has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on weapons shipped to the rebels through third parties, such as Egypt. Two separate covert actions have been aimed at Libyan leader Kaddafi. One was designed to stir up trouble for him in Chad (Libya has since withdrawn its occupation forces from that country). The other authorized contacts with Libyan dissidents in exile, in hopes of putting together a legitimate opposition. Briefing one congressional committee, CIA Director William Casey said such activities might lead to the "ultimate" removal of Kaddafi.

As a last resort, the destabilization or overthrow of a foreign government may be necessary, whether it involves subtle subversion or something nastier. Perhaps the same result could be achieved in broad daylight by military action or overt diplomacy. But if the public doesn't want to go to war, and if diplomacy offers insufficient leverage, covert action is the only alternative to backing down. Such plots may offend a democracy's sense of decency—and seem expedient all the same. If the aim of a covert action is in line with what Americans generally consider necessary, prudent and moral, most of them will tolerate the means.

Plot: Even so, a free society should not sacrifice its principles lightly. Plots against foreigners may not be as necessary as some practitioners of the covert arts would have us believe. In 1960 the CIA decided to kill Patrice Lumumba, the former prime minister of the Congo, who appeared to be on the verge of regaining power and handing his country over to the Soviet Union. The U.S. plan to poison Lumumba was never carried out—in part, perhaps, because key CIA operatives thought murder was going too far. "I didn't regard Lumumba as the kind of person who was going to bring on World War III," CIA station chief Lawrence Devlin told a congressional committee years later. "I saw him as a danger to the political position of the United States in Africa, but nothing more than that." Eventually, Lumumba was arrested by his political opponents, who announced in due course that he had been killed after escaping from jail. "Murder corrupts," said another reluctant CIA officer, but "I'm not opposed to capital



UPI photos



Guatemalan rebels with leftist effigy, Afghan insurgents, Lumumba: Can subversion be a proper tool of foreign policy?



punishment." The Congo, now known as Zaire, remains a loyal, if politically shaky, friend of the United States.

Another drawback to covert action is that it often makes things worse—or at least no better. The killing of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, after a U.S.-sponsored coup, did not leave us with more effective allies in Saigon. Flirting with supporters of the hated Somoza clan will probably weaken the U.S. position in Nicaragua, not strengthen it. Furthermore, in a democracy, it is almost impossible to guarantee that a covert action will remain covert.

Keeping secrets requires the acquiescence, if not the connivance, of the press. In 1953 a New York Times reporter named Kennett Love decided not to write about the CIA's role in deposing leftist Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh—out of "misguided patriotism," Love said later. The story came out anyway. In 1961 John F. Kennedy persuaded the Times that a lot of what it knew about the impending Bay of Pigs operation shouldn't be printed. The Times withheld a big part of the story, the invasion was a disaster, and Kennedy concluded that the newspaper would have done him a favor if it had blown the whistle.

Whistles are blowing more frequently these days. Covert actions almost always come to light—in news reports from distant countries now wired into the global village,

or in leaks from critics in Congress, the administration or the intelligence agencies themselves. Reporters know that the story will come out, and that if they don't print it, a competitor will. Even today, the news media will generally suppress a story if publication would put lives at risk or expose a secret that is indisputably vital to the national interest. Beyond that, some reporters and editors say that they will withhold a story if the covert action in question strikes them as necessary, prudent and moral. The press has no business making such value judgments. Its role in an open society is to print the news, fully and fairly, not to calculate the incalculable consequences and shave the truth a bit here and there.

Policy: A nation with global responsibilities still needs covert action as a third tool of foreign policy—one more forceful than diplomacy and less hideous than war. It is possible to conduct secret operations in a society like ours, but only with great difficulty. That is the way it should be for missions that so commonly violate basic democratic principles. The CIA may be at a disadvantage in competing with the machinations of closed societies, but no instrument of democratic government can be allowed to operate totally at odds with the ideals it is supposed to espouse and protect.

RUSSELL WATSON with DAVID C. MARTIN in Washington