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SUBJECT Clandestine Operations Around the World

TED KOPPEL: The U.S. intelligence community. Its main task is the collection and evaluation of information. But there is another, less visible side: clandestine operations. Under the Reagan Administration, they seem to be coming back into favor. We'll discuss that apparent trend tonight with four experts: former Deputy CIA Director Ray Cline; E. Howard Hunt, an intelligence officer for more than 20 years; Senator Joseph Biden, who's on the Senate Intelligence Committee; and former Senator Frank Church, who used to chair that committee.

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KOPPEL: Our focus tonight, what is sometimes referred to as covert activities or clandestine operations. It is that gray area, as it's been called, between diplomacy and combat, the means by which an Administration can act against its adversaries while maintaining deniability. It was, until the U.S. Senate began stripping away some of the classified wrapping paper, among the CIA's better-kept secrets. During the Carter Administration in particular, clandestine operations were reduced to a minimum. They seem to be on their way back into favor.

Again and again and again today at President Reagan's news conference, reporters gave the President the chance to deny what is customarily denied in public -- namely, even the suggestion that the U.S. Government would try to destabilize the government of another country by covert means. As White House correspondent Sam Donaldson reports, however, Mr. Reagan chose to rule out nothing.

SAM DONALDSON: President Reagan at his news conference today.

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MAN: Have you approved of covert activity to destabilize the present government of Nicaragua?

DONALDSON: Destabilize. Or, in simpler terms, overthrow. Is the United States trying to overthrow the government of Nicaragua?

From the day it took office, the Reagan Administration has strongly disliked the Sandinista junta that governs Nicaragua. The junta is leftist-Marxist. But more importantly, the Administration is convinced Nicaragua is a vital way station for a flow of Cuban-supplied arms to leftist guerrillas in other countries, particularly El Salvador.

SECRETARY OF STATE ALEXANDER HAIG: Nicaragua is being exploited as a base for the export of subversion and armed intervention throughout Central America. Cooperating with our friends and allies in the region, we will do whatever is necessary to contain the threat.

DONALDSON: And what is the United States doing? On February 3rd, ABC News broadcast a report that the Administration had discussed with Argentina the possibility of Argentine paramilitary forces infiltrating Nicaragua to help stop the arms flow and, more than that, to help destabilize or overthrow the Nicaraguan government. The Nicaraguan Foreign Minister said he thought the report was correct.

FOREIGN MINISTER MIGUEL D'ESCOTA: We have manifestations of involvement of Argentine military personnel at very high levels with the Nicaraguan counterrevolutionary efforts. And obviously, everyone knows the attitude of the United States government with regard to our revolution and with regard to our government.

DONALDSON: The next day, ABC News broadcast a follow-up story reporting that the Administration had prepared a broad plan to overthrow the Nicaraguan government that contained both economic and paramilitary elements. And last Sunday, the Washington Post reported that the plan was aimed at countering Cuban activities in a number of countries, particularly Nicaragua.

Again a Nicaraguan official said the reports of U.S. activity were correct.

AMBASSADOR NAVARRO: We know that there are counterrevolutionaries who are being trained in camps in Florida that have flown to Honduras and they're training the camps of the former national government against [unintelligible] there.

DONALDSON: Notwithstanding the statements of Nicaraguan officials, neither ABC News nor the Washington Post have been able

to confirm that any U.S. plan to overthrow the Nicaraguan government has actually been approved. It was, as recently as 10 days ago, the policy of the U.S. government, as stated by the counselor to the President, not to attempt to overthrow other governments.

EDWIN MEESE: Well, I think that we do have a policy of not overthrowing other governments. That is basically the policy of this country.

DONALDSON: But that was 10 days ago. Today the question was put to the President himself.

MAN: Have approved of covert activities to destabilize the present government of Nicaragua?

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN: Here again, this is something on which national interests, I just -- I will not comment.

MAN: ...you approve [unintelligible] statement of what the policy is as far as having American covert operations to destabilize any existing government, without specific reference to Nicaragua?

PRESIDENT REAGAN: Well, again, I'm going to -- I'm going to say this is like discussing the options. No comment.

DONALDSON: By refusing to comment, the President knows he's leaving the impression that activities to overthrow other governments may already be underway, an impression perhaps deliberately meant to worry America's foreign adversaries, but one that also seems to worry a lot of America's citizens as well.

KOPPEL: Clandestine activities by the CIA was a subject shrouded in secrecy for decades, known only to a few insiders. It wasn't until the mid-seventies that the U.S. Senate investigated covert actions by the agency.

John McWethy reports on what those hearings uncovered.

JOHN MCWETHY: It was at these hearings in 1975 that Americans learned for the first time that the Central Intelligence Agency had been involved in a lot more than just spying. Hidden far from public view and arm's-length from Congress and the President, yet always with their tacit approval, the CIA ran full-scale military operations, fighting wars never declared by the President or approved by Congress. The agency rigged elections in other countries, and sometimes plotted assassinations.

It all came out at these extraordinary hearings seven years ago. Yet even today, though sources close to the CIA say on a grossly smaller scale, covert activities continue.

Between 1961 and 1975, the CIA ran an estimated 900 major covert operations and several thousand smaller ones. A major operation, Chile, 1972 and '73. After failing to prevent Salvador Allende's operation as President of Chile, the CIA launched a yearlong campaign to unseat this Marxist politician. Millions were spent supporting opposition newspapers and political parties. Unions that crippled the economy with strikes were paid by the CIA to stay off the job.

September 11th, 1973. Allende was deposed. He died the same day of gunshot wounds. His opponents say he took his own life.

In Laos, the CIA hired a mercenary army, many recruited from the ranks of American forces in Vietnam, and they fought Communist insurgents. The CIA also owned and operated an entire airline to support that force.

Similar paramilitary operations were run by the CIA in Indonesia in the 1950s and Angola in the mid-1970s. Half a dozen foreign leaders, such as Trujillo of the Dominican Republic and Lumumba of the Congo, were killed in overthrow plots in which the CIA was involved, one way or the other.

Fidel Castro has always been one of the CIA's favorite targets. At least five plots were hatched by the agency to assassinate Castro, including hiring a Mafia hit man. As if attempts on his life were not enough, the U.S. also tried to take Cuba by force, the Bay of Pigs invasion, an army of refugees trained, armed and guided by the CIA.

Ironically, Cuban refugees are still undergoing paramilitary training in the U.S. Their goal, return to Cuba and overthrow Fidel Castro. There's no evidence they are today supported by the CIA, but there is ample evidence that the U.S. government ignores their activities.

When President Carter took office, he reportedly scaled back the CIA's covert operations to a mere shadow of what they used to be. But when the Russians invaded Afghanistan, the President ordered the CIA back into action, running guns to the rebels, making sure the Soviets continued to have a fight on their hands.

Since President Reagan took office, those close to the intelligence community say spirits at the CIA have been on the rise. At the same time, the small unit charged with directing covert operations has been expanding.

KOPPEL: When we come back, we'll talk with four men who've specialized in the intelligence community from outside and from within. Somewhat predictably, they have differing views on the value of covert operations.

KOPPEL: With us to help look at the question of CIA covert activities, are two men who used to work for that organization and two senators who have investigated it.

Ray Cline was a Deputy Director of the CIA. He is now a Director of the Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies. He's with us here in our Washington Bureau.

At our affiliate WPLG in Miami, E. Howard Hunt, who gained notoriety for his role in Watergate, but also spent two less conspicuous decades working for the CIA, part of that time in Latin America.

Also with us in Washington, former U.S. Senator Frank Church. During 1975 he chaired that special Senate committee that uncovered several, until then, unknown covert activities of the CIA.

And at our affiliate WPVI in Philadelphia, Democratic Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware. Senator Biden is currently a member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

Senator Church, let me begin, if I may, with you, because it was your famous quote about that rogue elephant gone wild that I think got about as much attention as anything back in the mid-1970s, and perhaps was responsible for deemphasizing the role of the CIA in covert or clandestine operations for a number of years. Do you have the sense that it's coming back?

FRANK CHURCH: Well, I suspect it is, from what I read in the newspapers. I have no other information. If so, I think we should ask ourselves this question -- laying aside the situations that involve the overriding security interests of the United States, the survival of this country, the avoidance of nuclear war, that kind of thing -- we should ask ourselves the question: If it's wrong for a foreign power to come into this country to spread false information, to bribe, to attempt to assassinate our leaders, and we wouldn't put up with that for a minute, then how can it be right for us to engage in that same kind of activity in other countries?

KOPPEL: All right. You've put it on a philosophical basis. Let's leave it on that basis.

And philosophically, what about that, Dr. Cline? Is that not a reasonable proposition? If it's wrong for them against us, why isn't it wrong for us against them?

RAY CLINE: Well, I believe that there are two different ideas of society or civilization at stake. I believe that we are concerned, and have been for 20 or 30 years, with countries in which highly disciplined minority groups, using primarily terror

and guerrilla warfare, are trying to overthrow governments which would like to have parliamentary or democratic systems, even though they're far from perfect in many cases. I believe that in those cases where our national security is involved, as the Church Committee recommended, we should use covert action to support democratic forces that are in danger of collapsing from external attack. These are two different situations.

KOPPEL: All right.

Mr. Hunt, you were for many years a senior intelligence officer. Is there any limit as to how far the United States government may go in its covert activities? Should there be a limit, a moral limit? Does that even enter into the discussion?

E. HOWARD HUNT: I think you've almost answered the question. I don't think that there is a moral limit, because the KGB, our principal opponent, the Soviet secret service, sets the parameters. And those parameters are absolutely boundless. There is nothing that the KGB won't do, hasn't done in the past to achieve its goals. Accordingly, we're forced to accept their ground rules and follow them.

KOPPEL: Senator Biden, are we indeed forced to accept those ground rules?

SENATOR JOSEPH BIDEN: Well, I think we should distinguish. You went through the first 10 minutes of this program focusing on Latin America. And by implication, I think your listeners assume that that must be a KGB operation.

Let's assume for a moment Mr. Hunt is right about the KGB. I'm not sure it's at all correct that we should be involved in covert activities that involve the violent overthrow of another government without the American people knowing what we are about. If it's that important to us, I think that should be overt, not covert.

KOPPEL: But I mean isn't that -- I mean you've just begun to answer the question I was going to ask, and that is, once you put it up to the American public, it ceases to be covert.

SENATOR BIDEN: There are certain things, I think, Ted, that must be and should be covert. That is, the collection of information, the involvement in an assessment of where our interests are, to what extent we should be prepared to support those interests. Those all should and must be done covertly.

But the question of an active effort to overthrow, to engage in war, if you will -- even if it's only with 20 people, it's an act of war against another country -- are matters that should be brought to the attention of the American people. If

it's that important to us -- that is, to overthrow a government. That's what I'm talking about now. If it's that important to us, then that's something I think the American people should be informed of and we should do it forwardly.

KOPPEL: Dr. Cline, let me raise with you a hypothetical question. When the President, as he did today, refuses to address a question like that, leaves open all possible options, is he doing something useful or is he doing something potentially destructive?

CLINE: I think the President is absolutely right to refuse to comment on whether we are conducting secret activities. One of the most clever sentences in the famous Church Committee report was by Senator Baker, who said, "We cannot conduct a Gallup Poll on whether we will conduct secret activities."

The question is not overthrowing governments. That's seldom the question. The question is supporting governments or peoples who are trying to have elections and democratic procedures. And Salvador is the center of the problem here, and we're trying to support a government. Nicaragua is trying to overthrow it with help from Cuba and help from the Soviet Union, which is using Cuba as a massive base for political and military infiltration in a very important strategic area of the Caribbean.

That is the issue. And I think Senator Biden would admit this is a serious matter.

KOPPEL: All right, gentlemen. When we come back, we'll take up the issue that I was addressing a moment ago with Mr. Hunt, and that is whether the United States ought to be involved in what I think all of us might agree are immoral operations.

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KOPPEL: Mr. Hunt, a moment ago you raised an intriguing, if somewhat chilling, notion that if they do it to us, we've got to be prepared to do it to them. Isn't there something about the American system that dictates that we don't necessarily stoop to the same depths as our adversaries?

HUNT: Well, I think, philosophically, we're talking about two different levels. We're talking about the mythic level, which is that we don't stoop to that sort of thing; and the practical level, which requires that we do.

I think it's important to understand, also -- and statesmen do understand this -- that the first obligation of any government is to preserve itself. If it can't preserve itself, then it can't care for its citizens. And in order to see to its self-preservation, it may be called upon to do what are normally

very reprehensible things. But that's one of the facts of life.

KOPPEL: Senator Biden, does that then require -- and you sit on the Intelligence Committee right now. Does that then require that you gulp and swallow certain things that you know about but put the politician's face to the rest of us, still talking about democracy and the high ideals to which we adhere?

SENATOR BIDEN: The answer to that question is partially yes. I think there are times. I think morality is difficult to define in this area, just as it would be difficult, Ted, if you suggested to me, is war moral? There can be secret wars and public wars. In effect, I agree with the statement just made, that there are certain circumstances where covert activities require us to do what the other team is doing also, just as in war we're required to do things that the other team is doing.

My quarrel is whether or not things reach a point where they are of such consequence to the future of this nation that the American people have an obligation -- we have an obligation to the American people to let them know what we are about because it involves their security.

Morality is a very elusive term to use in the area of war. And covert activities, in fact, sometimes reach that level.

KOPPEL: All right. Let's take it, then, off the particular pedestal of morality and bring it down to a very practical level.

Senator Church, is it in any respect impractical for the United States to be involved in clandestine operations, covert operations when, as has been the case several times over the past couple of decades, we sometimes get our hand caught in the cookie jar and we look very bad?

SENATOR CHURCH: Of course it's impractical. And I have to disagree with many of the statements that have been made. Of course there are circumstances where clandestine action may be necessary. I said that at the outset. But there have been other times when we have involved ourselves in cases, as in Chile, where the government had been freely elected by the Chilean people. I don't think we had a right to interfere there and to undertake to bring that government down. That is a denial of self-determination. And when those facts came out, as they will inevitably -- as long as we keep our society free, an inquisitive press will finally discover these secrets and bring them to light -- then look at the terrible political price we pay.

All over the world today, there are millions of people who make no distinction between the United States and the Soviet Union, because they see us both playing the same game.



I disagree with Mr. Hunt that we have to adopt Russian methods everywhere in the world and adopt their values to save ourselves. It's not a question of saving America in determining what the politics should be in a postage stamp country the size of El Salvador. That's simply nonsense.

KOPPEL: All right.

Mr. Hunt?

HUNT: I think this: that by talking about El Salvador, we've gotten a little bit off the track. I realize that the President today begged the questions that were put to him with regard to El Salvador.

But I do go back to my initial statement, that when the United States deems it necessary to do certain things in its own self-interest, it must do them. I certainly agree with Senator Biden.

Now, to take up briefly a point that Senator Church just raised, I think this: that there is a question of magnitude. When an operation, a purportedly or supposedly covert operation, gets too large to remain secret, then, clearly, CIA has no business staying involved in it. And I think this was one of the great problems of the Bay of Pigs. Everybody knew about it.

So we have not only a qualitative distinction, we have a quantitative distinction as well.

KOPPEL: Is it, Dr. Cline, a self-perpetuating kind of thing? One sometimes gets the impression that if you have the capacity for it and if you talk about it as a realistic option, that there are people then sitting over there in Langley, Virginia desperately thinking up things to do.

CLINE: No, Ted. I think you're off the beam. One thing I've been wanting to say is that that famous rogue elephant charge, even Frank Church and his committee said was not true, that CIA was responsive to executive review and control and authorization. And Frank acknowledges that, of course, after the investigation.

There is no large group of secret warriors champing at the bit. This is a myth. And it should have been disposed of when Carter and his people fired most of the old hands, both intelligence collectors and covert operators, a few years ago.

What's happening is that this President, like every President beginning with President Truman and Dwight Eisenhower, has had to reinvent the wheel. They've had to invent a second line of defense for supporting our friends and allies against

external subversion by doing something between diplomacy and sending in the Marines. Now, if that is successful in preserving the chance of the Salvador people to have an election in March and select a government of their own choice, which the guerrillas are trying to prevent, I think it's a good thing for democratic principles worldwide, and we ought to be proud of it.

KOPPEL: We have about a half a minute left.

Senator Biden, do you detect a great change between the Carter Administration and the Reagan Administration in reality?

SENATOR BIDEN: I detect a change in attitude, not in reality. I cannot discuss specifics. I've been on the committee since its inception. But I think the assertions and concerns about covert activities are vastly overblown. There's not any great covert action going on that I am aware of, unless we are not being told the truth in the committee. The fact of the matter is that it's -- we have reason to be concerned about the attitude expressed by some, but we are, I think, exaggerating what's happening.

KOPPEL: All right....