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DISINFORMATION

AN EXAMINATION OF SIX YEARS OF INCREDIBLE LYING

The term "disinformation" probably enjoyed its greatest-ever public awareness last fall — indeed, for many Americans it was the first time they'd heard the word — when the press revealed that over the summer the administration had initiated a campaign of deliberate lies about the supposed "terrorist" intentions of Libya's Colonel Muammar Qadhafi — thus to arouse U.S. and world opinion in support of possible further U.S. military or diplomatic action against the Libyan leader. Although past administration denials had successfully thwarted disclosure of other disinformation capers, in this case there was a smoking gun: a memo written by then-National Security Council chief Admiral John Poindexter outlining the Libyan campaign, first revealed in the *Washington Post* by Watergate hero Bob Woodward. The mass media, especially the television networks, seized on the memo and briefly made it a cause celebre. The subsequent Iran/contras scandals, themselves originally obscured by intensive disinformation campaigns, shortly subsumed the flap over the Poindexter memo.

But taken together, the memo and the two larger scandals have had one important beneficial effect on the public — it is now possible for the press to report the "dark side" of the United States government and be taken seriously. This is no small achievement, as during the 40 Cold War years the public has persistently given the benefit of the doubt to its political leaders. The consequences of this have been two unnecessary wars fought on the Asian mainland, an avoidable massive nuclear-weapons race, and the crushing of progressive social movements — a great number of them non-Marxist — in various Third World countries.

Disinformation is not new to the United States; it certainly did not originate under Ronald Reagan, however much he and his administration may have done in exploiting its varied possibilities for manipulating the public. Since the end of World War II disinformation has

been employed on innumerable occasions to prepare the public for U.S. government actions. The military/intelligence establishment of the Truman era used disinformation to sweep the U.S. into the Korean War and to defeat prewar Chinese efforts for a negotiated settlement. During the Eisenhower years, a disinformation campaign against the elected president of Guatemala preceded a CIA coup intended to protect U.S. banana companies from taxation.

In the '60s, the Kennedy administration, in preparing for the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, permitted the CIA to mount a disinformation campaign against Fidel Castro just at the moment Fidel was secretly trying to negotiate a decent relationship with the U.S. rather than having to lock Cuba into the Soviets' orbit. Lyndon Johnson gave us the entire Vietnam War via disinformation; even the North Vietnamese attack on U.S. ships in the Tonkin Gulf, the incident that provided public support for mass American intervention, turned out to be a fabrication. The Nixon-Kissinger team then nearly outdid Johnson, creating disinformation campaigns to cover up their illegal bombing of Cambodia and to set up the CIA-induced military coup against Chile's elected president. For their parts, Gerald Ford perpetuated the customary disinformation campaign about a Soviet weapons buildup and Jimmy Carter mounted an all-out anti-Soviet disinformation effort to conceal his administration's inventive bungling of pre-invasion Soviet overtures for an Afghanistan settlement that would have retained that country's long-standing status quo neutrality. (Even allowing for the work of the *Nation* magazine and a handful of scholarly journals, the untold story of Afghanistan — including a deliberate Reagan administration effort to prevent a negotiated settlement — remains one of the journalistic felonies of the '80s.)

Obviously, then, disinformation is not an occasional tool of a rampant administration; it is a long-standing adjunct of policy. Since World War II, the U.S.

government has used disinformation on a relatively widespread basis in order to win public acceptance of weapons and interventionist policies that otherwise would be scorned. There are three components to this. The "foreign policy establishment" has carried out disinformation largely aimed at protecting U.S. business interests abroad; the military-industrial complex has focused on anti-Soviet disinformation needed to convince the public to buy more arms (and particularly more big-ticket strategic arms); and the country's vast intelligence complex, for its own zealous causes (particularly regarding Third World countries), has created massive amounts of disinformation while giving disinformation aid and comfort to both other wings of government. (Although at rare times it has undermined the distortion efforts of those wings — certain CIA assessments of Soviet military expenditures that contradicted the Pentagon, for example.)

Presidents and their White House staffs can be victims of disinformation from these three complexes as well as utilizers of it, as both Eisenhower and Kennedy came to understand. But what has distinguished the Reagan administration from its predecessors is that in many cases the *originating* disinformation machinery has been moved from the agencies into the White House, while hard-line right-wing disinformation players like William Casey moved into all the agencies. Never before has disinformation been so well coordinated or agreed upon by all potential players, and no previous administration thought to begin almost all its initiatives, including many domestic ones, with a disinformation campaign. Disinformation has been as reflexive with this crowd as "spin control," and it feeds on itself. Stories thought up by a CIA agent in, say, Nicaragua will be seized upon (and actually believed) by the White House and upper level members of government as fact (Sandinistas physically attacking priests, for example), and will then be

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embellished with the upper-level members' own concoctions. Similarly, stories contrived by foreign governments have been as avidly pressed into service.

The result is that there is very little issuing from the present government that Americans can believe, though few Americans know yet how pervasively disinformed they've been. (Had the Tower Commission been better informed, it might not so lightly have concluded that Ronald Reagan didn't know much about the Poindexter-North machinations.) Three themes have been overriding, of course: the Soviet Union as the great, avaricious enemy; Nicaragua as the great immediate totalitarian threat, and the Middle East as the great test of U.S. resolve (covering up the enormous failure to build on Carter's Camp David peace initiative). In combination, and deliberately woven together by the administration, these themes have helped create the mass psychology that the U.S. is under siege by hostile, terrorist forces at every turn and that our only hope is to rally 'round the president and let him fight back for us. Working with such an extraordinarily exploitable impression, the president has asked us therefore to trust him on Star Wars, the contras, Libya, nuclear arms agreements and much more.

What follows here is a report on some of the most flagrant disinformation campaigns of the Reagan era as assembled by Fred Landis, a long-time chronicler of such events and an expert on CIA disinformation. Dr. Landis has taught political science at California State University-Los Angeles, the University of Illinois and San Francisco State University, and was a consultant to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in 1976. His latest book, *The CIA Propaganda Machine*, is due out later this year from Ramparts Press.

Four individuals are mentioned frequently here: Arnaud de Borchgrave, editor of the Moonie-owned *Washington Times* and former *Newsweek* correspondent; Robert Moss, a journalist and co-author with de Borchgrave of two novels exploiting disinformation themes; Claire Sterling, a journalist, book author and frequent contributor to *The New York Times* as a putative "terrorism expert"; and Michael Ledeen, a Georgetown University professor and another "terrorism expert" who is now showing up as the key liaison between Israel and the U.S. in the Irangate affair — not surprising, as Ledeen has long been suspected of having ties to the Mossad, Israel's version of the CIA. (He denies this.) Although the four don't hold government positions,

they have often been accused of being purveyors of disinformation that either originates elsewhere or originates with them and is picked up and given wider circulation by government agencies. Each is widely known to have extensive friendships and contacts in right-wing circles both here and abroad.

Two disinformation themes frequently covered in the *Weekly* have been omitted here: the administration's efforts to portray Nicaragua as the chief supplier of weapons to the Salvadoran rebels — a story much refuted, most authoritatively by former CIA analyst David MacMichael, who quit the agency in disgust over the White House and State Department fabrications; and the Libya terrorism link, often covered by Alexander Cockburn in his column and decimated by Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Seymour Hersh in the Sunday *New York Times* of three weeks ago. Citing as sources 70 current and former officials in the White House, the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency and the Pentagon, Hersh wrote that much of what the U.S. public has been told about "evidence" of a Qadhafi role in terrorism has been disinformation, including U.S. government intentions in last year's bombing raid on Libya — which, Hersh reports, was a planned effort to flat-out assassinate Qadhafi. (The report below does cover one Libya-related story: the hit team ostensibly sent to assassinate President

Reagan.)

The Libyan Hit Team Sent To Kill Reagan

Reporter David Martin started it all in the November 30, 1981 *Newsweek*, for which he was Pentagon reporter. Martin is the son of a career CIA officer. His story was that Muammar Qadhafi had sent a five-man Palestinian hit team to Washington to assassinate President Reagan. According to the report, the terrorists planned to set themselves up in a hotel across from the White House and hit the presidential helicopter with a Soviet-made SAM missile.

Newsweek hit the streets with the story on November 22. Other media didn't pick up on it until the White House "authenticated" the alleged Libyan plot on December 2. Next, Jack Anderson was supplied by Israeli intelligence agents with composite drawings of the alleged terrorists. Armed with these drawings, the major media now headlined the plot. The elusive terrorists were variously described as being in Canada, on their way to Washington, or lurking in Tijuana.

The Hearst Corporation-owned Los Angeles *Herald Examiner* began pushing the Tijuana theory and, citing "sources," added infamous international terrorist Carlos to the story. On December 10, the U.S. Border Patrol in San Diego was supplied with the IDs of two Libyan hit teams, one of which was supposedly led by Carlos.

At this point, Qadhafi went on TV to denounce Reagan as "ignorant" and a "liar." This brought Michael Ledeen (discussed above and then a consultant to the State Department) out onto ABC-TV to denounce the irresponsibility of the media in acting as a forum for terrorists by giving Qadhafi air time. Reagan himself answered Qadhafi at a December 17 press conference. "We have complete confidence in the evidence, and he [Qadhafi] knows it," the president said.

Reagan's staff ostensibly took the threat seriously enough to surround the White House with concrete bunkers, use decoy presidential limousines and helicopters, and propose the permanent diversion of traffic from the Pennsylvania Avenue side of the White House. Those senior staff members who may have known that the story was disinformation certainly didn't tell the Secret Service.

The story began to unravel on December 14, when FBI Director William Webster first cast doubt on the existence of such a hit team. By January 3, 1982, Webster had repudiated the story in a television interview. Webster said the FBI had never believed the story or been able to confirm any of its details.

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By the end of December 1981, both *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* were describing the story as a hoax. Ronald J. Ostrow and Robert Toth of the *Los Angeles Times*, citing investigative sources, blamed the original disinformation on the Israelis. If they were correct, the Israelis had accomplished something important: a rupture in U.S.-Libya commercial and diplomatic relations. (The administration asked U.S. citizens to leave Libya and requested U.S. oil companies to withdraw.) On the other hand, if it was an administration plot, the story served another important purpose, as it helped prepare the mass of Americans who don't have access to either coast's *Times* for stepped-up U.S. intervention in the Middle East and for a renewal of the hard-line Cold War stance toward those Libyan "allies," the Soviets.

(Editor's note: In Seymour Hersh's recent *New York Times* article, which appeared after the above was written, Hersh quotes his sources as claiming that the story came from William Casey, not Israel, and was part of a larger disinformation campaign mounted by Casey against Libya, one in which Casey contrived phony "evidence" that was passed around government circles as official CIA reports and was leaked to the press by Michael Ledeen. Hersh writes that Casey acted with the approval of President Reagan, then-Secretary of State Alexander Haig and Assistant Secretary of State William Clark, one of Reagan's closest friends. Hersh quotes "an intelligence official who has direct access to communications intelligence reports" as saying, "The stuff I saw did not make a substantial case that we had a threat. There was nothing to cause us to act as we have, saying Qadhafi is enemy No. 1." Hersh also quotes an official who served on a special task force assessing the Libyan information as telling him that William Casey was "in effect, running an operation inside the American government . . . He was feeding the disinformation into the system so it would be seen as separate, independent reports, and taken seriously by other government agencies." Still another source told Hersh, "The whole thing was a big fabrication." If Hersh is correct, then any Israeli role in the event — the "terrorist" sketches, for example — would have been opportunistic capitalizing on Casey's scheme.)



Former CIA head William Casey.

Nicaraguan Drug Smuggling

In 1984, the administration masterminded an attempted drug sting in Nicaragua — one that, as an article in the *L.A. Times* Opinion section noted last December, bears the fingerprints of Oliver North. The key link is a cargo airplane that would become famous and would be associated with North ally Richard Secord and Southern Air Transport. In 1984, the plane, a C-123K, was turned over to DEA informer Adler Seal, presumably by Secord, and outfitted with cameras hidden under both wings. Seal then landed the plane in Managua. A Sandinista security official, Frederico Vaughn, was captured standing near the aircraft by the plane's cameras. The plane then returned to the U.S., drugs were found, and Seal testified that he got them from Vaughn, whom a Miami grand jury proceeded to indict. The White House made maximum propaganda use of this incident, accusing the Sandinistas of widespread drug dealing.

As it happens, like the proverbial albatross, this same C-123K returned to Nicaragua last October carrying Eugene Hasenfus. A few weeks ago CNN reported that planes obtained by North and Secord from Southern Air Transport and used in

the contra supply operation regularly flew back to the U.S. with cocaine after taking guns to Central America for the contras. While it has not been demonstrated that North knew about this drug smuggling (assuming it happened — the Senate is investigating), this has all the earmarks of a North dirty trick: using drugs to finance weapons for the contras while spreading disinformation accusing the Sandinistas of this kind of activity.

The case against Vaughn? Despite the grand jury indictment, Seal's testimony was the only evidence linking Vaughn to the drugs. Just when it appeared that the case was unraveling and that Seal's background as a "compelled" witness and drug dealer was becoming known, Seal was found murdered, effectively terminating the case. (The Colombians have been arrested. The murder weapon has been traced to a group allegedly engaged in illegal gun-running to the contras.) The White House, however, persisted in using the story to smear the Sandinistas; President Reagan, in fact, made much of it in a March 16, 1986 special TV address seeking aid for the contras. Referring to the Seal airplane, the president accused the Sandinista leadership of complicity in cocaine running. The next day, DEA director John C. Lawson told *The New York Times* that there was no evidence whatever to support Reagan's assertion. (Again, it is useful to remember that most of the public does not get to read *The New York Times*.)

To spread the disinformation, former Senator Paula Hawkins (R-Florida), a close ally of President Reagan, in September 1984 turned her Subcommittee on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse into a platform for Michael Ledeen to expand on the subject of Sandinista-Cuban drug smuggl-

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ing. (Ollie North, it might be noted, was very active last year in fund-raising for Hawkins' unsuccessful re-election bid.) Hawkins also helped in another way: The term "narco-terrorism," as applied to the Sandinistas, first appeared on September 18, 1984, in an article by Hawkins in the *Washington Times*, a newspaper that serves as a propaganda organ for the Moonies. (Notably, the term was also used in connection with the "Bulgarian plot to kill the pope" at hearings held by another North ally, former Senator Jeremiah Denton [R-Alabama], for his Subcommittee on Terrorism. Testifying were Robert Moss and the ubiquitous Michael Ledeen.)

All of this recalls a similar disinformation campaign run by the CIA against Cuba in the '60s, when it was claimed that Cuba was a control point of heroin-running into the U.S. (Actually, heroin comes overwhelmingly from those U.S. allies Turkey, Thailand and, more recently, Mexico.) From time to time the Cuban connection is reincarnated in another form, most recently in December 1984, when "unnamed" State Department, CIA and Justice Department officials told the *San Francisco Examiner* that Robert Vesco, the fugitive financier, was, with Cuban, Libyan and Bulgarian help, running a drug-smuggling ring from his luxurious seaside villa in Cuba.

Sandinista Persecution of *La Prensa*

Since the Reagan administration took office and William Casey took over the CIA, the principal focus of CIA disinformation has not been Libya, but Nicaragua. That country has also been the target of a major destabilization campaign, meaning covert acts meant to turn a population against its government. The CIA has unleashed upon this country a well-tested bag of tricks reminiscent of its highly successful — and well-documented by Senate Intelligence Committee hearings of the mid-'70s — campaign against the Chilean government of Salvador Allende, an effort that paved the way for the U.S.-engineered military coup that made Augusto Pinochet the Chilean dictator.

According to the 1983 *Facts on File*, there were two major meetings of the National Security Council to authorize covert action against Nicaragua: in March 1981, when \$19.5 million was allotted, and in April 1982. Even before this there were two telltale signs indicating that the Nicaraguan newspaper *La Prensa* had already, even under Jimmy Carter, become an "asset" of the CIA. (*Newsweek* of November 8, 1982, reported that in 1978 Carter had signed a "finding" authorizing covert CIA support for "democratic elements" in Nicaragua, such as the press.)

One sign was that Pedro Joaquin Chamorro Jr., the assistant editor of *La Prensa*, was named to the executive leadership of the InterAmerican Press Association, which soon began giving extensive coverage in its newsletter to "threats" against free speech in Nicaragua. (Chamorro has just been named one of the new civilian heads of the contras.) In December 1977, *The New York Times* identified the IAPA as a "covert action resource" of the CIA. My own research has shown that one of the IAPA's primary purposes is to circulate through its monthly newsletter groundless charges of threats to a free press in countries moving away from U.S. control. For example, coinciding with the three-year period of CIA destabilization in Chile, the IAPA newsletter devoted 25 percent of its space to alleged threats to the Chilean press by the Allende government — pure disinformation, since, as a matter of historical fact, the Allende government never intruded in the rambunctious Chilean press, which was largely controlled by right-wing papers hostile to government programs. The newspaper *El Mercurio* was often singled out by the IAPA as a target of the Allende government; in July 1971, the paper's director, Rene Silver Espejo, bluntly told me in a taped interview that nothing whatever had happened to *El Mercurio*. (As it happens, *El Mercurio* was identified as being a focus of CIA activities during this period by the House Select Committee on Intelligence, whose 619-page 1978 report, *The CIA and the Media*, still makes fascinating reading on the nature of the kind of covert operations pushed by the Reagan-Casey crowd. Other essential documents for understanding CIA covert operations are *Covert Action in Chile*, released in December 1975 by the Senate

Select Committee on Intelligence Activities, and *Covert Action*, released in March 1976 by the same body.)

The second sign of a *La Prensa* takeover by the CIA was a dramatic change in the nature of the paper's coverage. As the CIA-influenced newspapers had done in Chile, *La Prensa* began running a series of sensational, *National Enquirer*-like articles that soon coincided with a larger CIA effort to discredit Sandinista leaders, create artificial divisions in the population and demoralize the Nicaraguan people.

Consider some of the headlines from early '81, when the Reagan administration signaled a step-up in anti-Sandinista activities: "Beware of Exotic Plague," "Plague Threatens Tobacco," "Giant Mosquitos Invade Managua — They Are Bloodsuckers," "Rabid Vampire Bats Transmit Rabies," "Malaria Plague Treated by Cuban Technicians," "16 Children With Polio," "Russians Bring Polio Vaccine," "Cuban Cattle Bring Hoof-and-Mouth Disease," "Mosquitoes Transmit Dengue Fever," "Cuban Pork Infected With Swine Virus."

These headlines were coordinated with rumor and graffiti campaigns aimed at giving a religious meaning to the plagues allegedly inflicting Nicaragua, comparing them to the biblical plagues sent to Egypt as a sign of God's displeasure. Although many of the articles were fabricated — there never were any plagues — or used information that was greatly distorted or taken out of context, to the highly religious Nicaraguan population they had an obvious psychological effect: They linked Cubans and Russians (the former whose presence in the country was minuscule at that point, and the latter whose presence was almost non-existent) to the plagues and punishment of Nicaragua. As it happens, the CIA-controlled Chilean papers — using techniques right out the U.S. psychological warfare manuals and CIA disinformation labs — had mounted an identical effort against the Allende government.

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As in Chile, where *El Mercurio* had carried stories constantly associating mutilation with food in order to create an image of total and absolute chaos and nausea in the country, *La Prensa* also peppered its paper with mutilation stories in early 1981. Some headlines: "Three Babies Born Without Heads in Leon," "Criminal Band in Leon Commits Cannibalism," "Head Missing of Labor Leader," "Capture Jack the Ripper." In subsequent months the mutilation stories were followed by several articles about the Virgin Mother making miraculous appearances in Nicaragua, and letting it be known, according to *La Prensa's* religious editor Humberto Belli, that she was not happy with the Sandinistas. After the Virgin's first appearance, a plaster statue of Mary was found to be miraculously sweating (or so *La Prensa* reported). Soon after, *La Prensa* was reporting the Virgin being widely sighted in street lamps and light bulbs. Before Grenada was redeemed by the Marines, *La Prensa* reported the Virgin descending upon it as well. Over the next year she also appeared, according to *La Prensa*, in Cuba, Poland, Czechoslovakia and China. The message was not lost on Nicaragua's religious population: The Virgin was going after Socialist countries, therefore Nicaragua — despite its mixed economy and protection of civil liberties at that point — must be Socialist. The "Virgin" campaign, it should be noted, followed the Reagan administration vote to expand covert operations against Nicaragua — part of which clearly has been to split off Catholics from the government.

Another disinformation technique adopted by *La Prensa* in emulation of the Chilean press was the juxtaposition of photos of Sandinista leaders next to articles about vicious criminals. Any wild rumors linking Sandinistas to crime or any kind of abuse were dramatically played up, as were instances of citizens' discontent. Although the Sandinistas understood what was happening, they forbore from intervening in *La Prensa* out of the quite correct belief that to do so would provide the Reagan administration with an immense tool with which to rally public and congressional support for its crusade against them.

By mid-1982, however, the war with the CIA-recruited contras (for excellent accounts of their recruitment, see the *L.A. Times* of March 3-5, 1985 and *Washington Post* reporter Chris Dickey's book, *With the Contras*) had heated up, as had the CIA sabotage and economic and political destabilization campaign (according to the *London Times* and the *Nation* magazine, opposition politicians were bribed and the church was pushed to take a strong anti-Sandinista stand).

The Sandinistas now felt compelled to impose an emergency decree restricting the rights of assembly and imposing censorship

on the press. By this time *La Prensa* was openly engaged in creating buying panics in already shortage-plagued Nicaragua. By reporting that a certain commodity was about to be in short supply (though it actually wasn't), *La Prensa* fomented buying rushes — and soon after, those commodities were in short supply.

The censoring of *La Prensa* was certainly what the CIA and the Reagan administration had hoped to bring about. In their mass disinformation campaign against Nicaragua, no other single element has carried so much weight with the public, the press and Congress. Knowing what a useful propaganda tool *La Prensa* was, the administration saw to it that the newspaper — was openly funded after Congress cut off — or thought it cut off — covert CIA operations against Nicaragua. Few Americans know that from January 1985 until the Nicaraguan government finally shut it down late last year, *La Prensa* received money from the National Endowment for Democracy, a U.S. government agency that supposedly supports "democratic institutions" abroad and which the press has now linked to Oliver North's other operations. In essence, the U.S. government controlled the opposition newspaper in a country against which it had gone to war.

To appreciate the effectiveness of the integrated psychological warfare, rumor and press campaigns, consider this report from

Insight magazine of January 19, 1987, written by Roger Fontaine, former head of Latin American planning at the National Security Council:

The first attack on the Sandinista power structure took place in Managua the night of Nov. 17, 1986. About 2,000 slum dwellers attacked and destroyed a police station. The barrio's inhabitants were spurred to violence after rumors circulated for weeks that the Sandinistas protected occult groups who were kidnaping children for blood extraction, dismemberment and cannibalism. State Department officers at the U.S. Embassy in Managua confirmed that the grisly stories had circulated . . . "One common story," one cable reported, "asserts that a satanic cult kidnaps children, whose blood is extracted for an ailing Sandinista *comandante* and whose bodies are used as meat."

The *L.A. Times Magazine* pointed out over the weekend that the contra radio station was pushing this tale for all it's worth.

The International Soviet Terror Network

As reported in *The New York Times* in May 1981, a CIA "National Foreign Assessment Report on Terrorism" dated 2/3/81 rejected allegations of a Soviet role in international terrorism. FBI director William Webster, appearing on *Meet the Press* on April 26, 1981, stated that the FBI — despite years of Soviet-watching — had no evidence of Soviet backing of terrorism in the U.S. Conrad Hassel, FBI director of anti-terrorism, speaking at the 1979 annual meeting of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers: "If you want to believe in the conspiracy theory of terrorism, well, you've got it, but there's no evidence for it." And Howard Bane, director of the CIA's Department of Terrorism, reacting to a speech by former CIA deputy director Ray Cline at the same 1979 AFIO meeting: "We've got to get Cline off this Moscow backing of terrorism. It's divisive. It's not true. There is not one single bit of truth to it."

Finally, lest it be suspected that things may have changed since 1981, the current best-seller *The Financing of Terrorism* by *London Times* defense correspondent James Adams presents a well-documented case that terrorist groups are self-financed and largely self-directed. There is no "Soviet terror network" or much of an "international terror network." There is state-sponsored terrorism, but this is peculiar to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

There is an apparent paradox here. The notion of an international Soviet terror network has been reported in the U.S. media for years, and from time to time various administration officials and their right-wing allies in Congress and the press have trotted out the idea that the Soviets are really behind all the world's terrorism, lending a push to one or another of the administration's policies, such as an end to arms control talks. Disclaimers even from such experts as above get little attention in the

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mass media, but when Alexander Haig as Secretary of State or Ronald Reagan, who made much of it during the 1980 political campaign, pronounce the Soviets the source of all terrorism and the mass media reports this disinformation, there is an incalculably huge impact on the public mind.

The theme of an international Soviet terror network was given a big push in Israel during the July 1979 Jonathan Institute Conference on Terrorism. The institute and the conference were put together by former Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Benjamin Netanyahu (who named it after his brother). Keynote speakers were our old friends Michael Ledeen, Claire Sterling and Robert Moss, plus Lord Chalfont, a right-wing former British cabinet officer and present-day writer. The top officials from all five branches of Israeli intelligence were there, as well as representatives from the CIA and prominent Republican candidates. This conference helped inspire Claire Sterling's influential *The Terror Network*, Robert Moss and Arnaud de Borchgrave's *The Spike*, and articles in *Commentary*, *New Republic* and *Washington Quarterly*.

Because it has influenced the thinking of the mass media, Sterling's book, more of a theological than a factual work, is worth examining. In it, Sterling artfully redefines terrorism so that all terrorist roads lead to Moscow.

Herewith the Sterling rules for discovering KGB plots: 1) If the terrorist is overtly left-leaning, he is automatically controlled by Moscow; 2) If the terrorist is overtly right-wing, he is covertly red and controlled by Moscow; 3) If the weapon used in a terrorist act is of Soviet manufacture, this is prima facie evidence of control by Moscow; 4) If the weapon used is of U.S. manufacture, Sterling can trace it by serial number to an assault by Red Brigades on some NATO base — the Red Brigades are controlled by Moscow; 5) If all the available evidence points to the Mafia, or a right-wing criminal has actually confessed, we should remember that "red" and "black" (right-wing) terrorists work together.

In support of these conclusions, Sterling does an extraordinary job of twisting evidence or reporting simply made-up evidence from intelligence and right-wing circles that have their own reasons for disinforming the public about the Soviets. Forty percent of her footnotes quote herself, Moss, or Ledeen; the remainder quote other Jonathan conference participants, Israeli intelligence, and CIA reports with virtually no questioning of whether the information supposedly supplied by these agencies is accurate.

How much currency these themes gained was indicated by the fact that Sterling, of all people, was hired by *The New York Times* to cover the trial of attempted papal assassin Mehmet Ali Agca, even though Sterling's work had been discredited in scholarly and alternative publications. In her reports, Sterling, of course, proceeded to manipulate the context of the trial evidence to suggest a Bulgarian-Soviet link — an observation actually refuted by the trial evidence itself and by the suspect.

It's useful to note that, as reported in the *Wall Street Journal* (July, 1979), the purpose of the Jonathan conference was to combat the growing isolation of Israel. The idea, the journal said, was to get the U.S. to perceive an Israeli problem as also a U.S. problem. Hence, any Soviet "connection" to terrorism would likely stir up U.S. sympathies. A second Jonathan Institute Conference on Terrorism was held June 24-27, 1984, in Washington. Again, Michael Ledeen and Claire Sterling spoke, as did Arnaud de Borchgrave and Lord Chalfont, the latter two covering "Terrorism and the Media." De Borchgrave's *Washington Times* gave daily front-page coverage to the conference. Some headlines: "The Hidden Peril — America in the Gunsight of Global Terror"; "Terrorist Groups Now Firmly Established in the U.S."; "Kremlin Accused of Aid to Terrorism"; "The Terrorist Threat — Accurate Intelligence Is the First Line of Defense"; "Mass Media Accused of Neutrality"; and "The Terrorist Threat — Chemical, Biological Attack Possible."

The Bulgarian Plot To Kill the Pope

On May 31, 1981, a young Turk named Mehmet Ali Agca fired shots at Pope John Paul II as the pope's vehicle circled through St. Peter's Square. Although Agca was indisputably associated with a Turkish criminal and political group called the Gray Wolves [Editor's note: and has also been linked to various Western intelligence services, including the CIA], which had historic ties to European fascist organizations in the pre- and post-World War II era, news reports soon began to appear that, of all people, the Bulgarians, perhaps as agents of the Soviets, were behind the attempted shootings, and not the Gray Wolves. As evidence, the reports

cited Agca's "mysterious" transit through Bulgaria before the shooting, the movements of certain Bulgarian officials, and, later, even some photos purporting to show some alleged members of the Bulgarian intelligence service in Vatican Square. Agca was soon reported to be giving corroborative testimony to this.

The initial reports were later found to have derived significantly from a far-right-wing and neo-fascist element of the Italian intelligence and military service, one with historically close ties to the CIA and presumably with some connection to the Gray Wolves, however tentative. (Many high-ranking members of this element, known as P-2, have since been forced out of office, and some into jail, over a scandal involving an attempt to overthrow the Italian government.) At his trial last year Agca, in between claiming to be God (his lawyer described him as a schizophrenic psychopath), would say he was forced into making accusations against the Bulgarians by his interrogators — a charge for which there was independent verification at a court hearing on another matter. And Italian magistrates found no evidence with which to convict the one Bulgarian charged in the case, Sergei Antonov, the commercial attache at the Bulgarian embassy.

Despite all this, the Bulgarian plot story got an extraordinarily heavy and long disinformation run.

The first reports of an alleged Bulgarian connection appeared in the Italian newspaper *Il Giornale Nuovo*, a right-wing sheet with close relations to Italy's intelligence circles and a paper widely believed among the Italian intelligentsia to be at minimum "CIA influenced." (Michael Ledeen wrote the initial "Bulgarian" story. His career as a journalist began here, and the paper is a frequently cited source of reports in Claire Sterling's *Terrorist Network*.) From there the story was picked up by the mass media. In Washington, careful leaks from the administration suggested that there was no reason to disbelieve the story. Right-wing and Cold War lobbying outfits such as the Committee for the Present Danger seized on the tale.

All of this was fortuitous, to say the least, for the administration, which was at the time bent on reviving the Cold War and was pressing for a vast new military buildup, especially of the high-ticket strategic weapons so beloved by the right and by their military-contractor allies. Indeed, the "Bulgarian plot" became one of the strongest elements of a public psychology that swung heavily against "the evil empire," making it difficult for critics of the administration's weapons and arms control policies to get a hearing in the media or in Congress.

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In the real world, it happens that the all-important (in the sense of controlling public perception of events) evening network news shows do not do much original, careful research. They rely instead on a variety of sources, especially published material and public documents, as well as "studies" by outside agencies, to set the attitude of their reports and provide much of the information. (Readers should be suspicious of any reports, Op-Ed page articles or information issuing from the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies, for whose *Washington Quarterly Journal* Michael Ledeen once toiled as editor.)

In the "Pope Plot" case, perhaps the most influential key "background" material for the ensuing network reports was a *Reader's Digest* article in September 1982 by none other than Claire Sterling, purporting to document the Bulgarian connection. The article was coordinated with an NBC-TV special, *The Man Who Shot the Pope: A Study in Terrorism*, in which Sterling was interviewed at length. The conservative *Reader's Digest*, here providing a knowing or unknowing disinformation channel, helped out with a giant publicity campaign for the article. How did Sterling account for a Gray Wolf being part of a communist plot? She suggested that this was part of a "legend" the KGB had created for Agca to deceive the West.

Meanwhile, Michael Ledeen and Robert Moss gave aid and comfort to the story by appearing before Denton's Subcommittee on Terrorism, and Moss went on *Nightline* to say that one of the (already-discredited) sketches of the elusive terrorists from the famed Libyan hit team sent to kill Reagan resembled a face in the crowd photographed in St. Peter's Square. (Personally, I think the guy in the photo is Father Guido Sarducci of *Saturday Night Live*.) Michael Ledeen later got back in the act with an attack on journalistic critics of the Bulgarian connection in the neo-conservative magazine *Commentary* (June 1983) and in his book *Grave New World*, in which he accused several respected journalists of being, at minimum, dupes of Soviet propagandists for questioning the Bulgarian connection. Included on his enemies list were the late columnist Joseph Kraft and Henry Kamm of *The New York Times*, who had quoted Israeli "intelligence sources" as being skeptical of the story. Ledeen, who later put the Israelis together with Oliver North's NSC for the Iranian arms deal, but denies being an Israeli intelligence or disinformation agent, wrote: "I asked Israeli officials if they could confirm Kamm's account of their government's skepticism, and they responded after several days by denying that any Israeli intelligence official [his italics] had ever made such a statement."

(For a superb refutation of Sterling's, Ledeen's and Moss' twisted evidence in the Bulgarian connection, as well as a scholarly dissection of the pope plot as a disinformation campaign, see the Spring 1985 issue of *Covert Action Information Bulletin*. The report, by Frank Brodhead, Howard Friel and Edward S. Herman, should be required reading for every journalist in the West.)

The Chemical Dust Caper

The date was August 22, 1985. The Reagan administration was preparing for a summit meeting with the Soviets. The following story appeared in the *L.A. Times*, typical of news reports all over the country and on network TV.

WASHINGTON — The U.S. government accused the Soviet secret police Wednesday of planting a potentially cancer-causing chemical dust on American diplomats in Moscow to help track their movements and discover their contacts among Soviet citizens.

State Department spokesman Charles Redman said the United States "protested the practice in the strongest terms" to Soviet authorities, describing it as a blatant violation of diplomatic practice and a potential danger to the health of U.S. personnel.

In Santa Barbara, White House spokesman Larry Speakes said that "it's entirely possible" President Reagan will raise the issue when he meets Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev in Geneva in November. But Speakes said the meeting should not be disrupted as a result of the incidents.

Nevertheless, the dispute certainly will chill the atmosphere of the meeting, the first between a U.S. President and a Soviet Communist Party General Secretary since President Jimmy Carter met President Leonid I. Brezhnev in Vienna in 1979. Speakes said that Reagan was informed of the incidents Monday.

The Soviets have used chemical tracking techniques at least since the mid-1970s in Moscow and elsewhere, including at least one incident in the United States, a State Department official said. He said Washington decided to protest the practice now, instead of 10 years ago, because the use of the chemical was increased sharply this spring.

U.S. officials said they first learned of the potential health risks of the chemical, identified as nitrophenylpentadiene, or NPPD, within the last few weeks.

The prime targets for the chemical espionage apparently are Soviet dissidents and others who meet clandestinely with U.S. diplomats. The Soviet secret police, known as the KGB, presumably could consider the presence of the chemical on the person or property of a Soviet citizen to be evidence of a secret contact with a U.S. diplomat. Those found to bear traces of the chemical, which experts said could be fluorescent, could then be interrogated.

The State Department official said that the chemical is dusted on doorknobs, auto steering wheels and other places U.S. diplomats are likely to touch. Once a person is contaminated with the chemical, it is difficult to remove completely, he added, and KGB chemical tests can detect very small amounts of the substance.

The official said Washington "assumes" that the chemical also has been used against private American citizens, including journalists, and against other Western diplomats. However, proof has been obtained only of use against U.S. Embassy personnel.

He said the United States is concerned both about the political implications of the tracking and about the possible health risks. But he made it clear that Washington decided to go public only after learning of the health aspects. Presumably, the United States kept quiet at first to avoid letting the KGB know what the United States knew about the Soviet technique.

The official declined to speculate on why the increase in the chemical's use coincided with Gorbachev's selection as the Soviet leader and added that the timing of Wednesday's announcement was not related to the November summit.

Speakes also said that Wednesday's announcement was not timed to detract from the announcement of the coming anti-satellite weapon test. "No connection whatsoever," he declared. "You're reading more into it than exists. We simply, once we got the facts in hand, felt that it was important that we proceed with pro-

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tecting our personnel and informing them of the exposure."

Redman said that NPPD "has been determined through biological testing" to cause mutations, or genetic changes. Chemicals that cause mutations in any organism often — but not always — cause cancer in humans. Redman said extensive tests, possibly lasting years, would be necessary to determine if the chemical is a carcinogen.

Even taken at face value, the contradictions in the story were obvious. The U.S. had known about the spy dust for 10 years, but — even with all its chemical sophistication and sensitivity to being spied on — had let it continue, taking no preventative measures until it suddenly learned that there was a health hazard. Only then did the U.S. protest spy dusting as "a violation of diplomatic practice." Nor was there any explanation of just how the U.S. government came to learn "in the last few weeks" that the chemical was a health hazard — what had inspired the tests, who had performed them, and what documented medical history there was of problems with the chemical. Had any U.S. Embassy workers been stricken over the past 10 years?

Although the press didn't raise these questions, it did an elaborate job of covering the show in Moscow in which U.S. Embassy employees and some 25 diplomats from other countries were called in for a briefing by top officials and were then interviewed with their worried families about the meaning of it all. Would they come down with cancer? Flashed all across the U.S., the scene certainly raised the ugliest suspicions about the Soviets and tended to confirm the "evil empire" characterization of a nation with which the U.S. was about to enter a summit negotiation. Clearly, the United States had to remain firm against such a nation; gestures toward peace from it would necessarily be suspect and were to be resisted. Any country whose officials would willfully cause cancer was not a country that could be trusted on any measures.

The Soviet Union said outright that creating this impression was the purpose of the "disclosure." Calling the story "absurd inventions," *Tass* noted that the U.S. claims were intended "to prepare the groundwork for a regular slanderous campaign against the Soviet Union, to poison the atmosphere in relations between our two countries, and to fan hostility toward the Soviet people." The Reagan administration denied this.

Who was telling the truth?

Several months after the disclosure, and well after the non-eventful Vienna summit meeting in which the U.S. budged not an inch on any of its positions, it was quietly noted in a handful of U.S. publications that the United States had been using such "spy dust" for years to track its own diplomatic targets. No negative medical results were ever reported from this. Then in February, 1986, the U.S. Embassy in Moscow quietly reported to staffers that there was not, nor had there ever been, a threat to them from the chemical. (The embassy didn't say whether the chemical had actually been found at the embassy, or whether that part of the story was contrived as well.)

And in response to an *L.A. Weekly* query about the State Department's latest position on the "spy dust," a department spokesman said, "I'll get back to you if I can find an answer." He never did. ■