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NASSER PLOT CIA'S CULT OF ASSASSINATION

by John Marks

Despite the best of stated intentions, the Senate Select Committee investigating the intelligence agencies did not find out that the CIA plotted to kill Egypt's former President Gamel Abdul Nasser during the mid-1950s. Not that the Church committee did not ask. It specifically requested the CIA for information on the subject and received this reply: "This Agency has no records that any teams or individuals have ever been sent to Egypt for the purpose of attempting to assassinate Nasser." There ended the Senate inquiry.

By the time last year the Church committee started probing the use of assassination as an instrument of American foreign policy, the CIA may well have been telling the truth. After all, the agency has admitted that numerous sensitive files have been shredded in recent years. The committee's assassination report, issued in November, made it clear that CIA operatives had not been diligent in leaving behind a "paper trail."

But the CIA had indeed been involved in planning Nasser's death. Last spring, a former agency Deputy Director told a British television (Granada) documentary crew that a plan was under consideration in the CIA after the unsuccessful British and French invasion of Suez in 1956 to kill the former Egyptian president. On the same show, the CIA's former top Middle East operative, Kermit Roosevelt, confirmed that at British instigation, the agency was considering replacing Nasser "by a palace revolution." Roosevelt, however, said nothing about murder, and he was unavailable for further comment.

A now-retired CIA operative with direct knowledge acquired during his 20 year career in the agency's

Clandestine Services has more to say on the Nasser case. He recalls vividly the great anger directed toward Nasser within the agency—and throughout the U.S. government—as the Egyptian president seemed to be moving out of the Western orbit and toward the Soviet camp. The CIA, according to the source, had a particular grudge toward Nasser because it had invested considerable money and effort in training and advising his intelligence service—to the point of financing a new headquarters for the Egyptian spooks.

"The place was ready for its grand opening," says the source, "and we had a little secretary take the Egyptians close to a million dollars in black-bag funds for their confidential fund. Yet, when our police advisor went down to the brand new building, he couldn't get in. He didn't have a security pass. We had set up their security system, but he still couldn't get in. That's when Nasser was playing both sides of the street. He took our money, took our training, and then wouldn't let us around. The agency was furious at Nasser."

The ex-operative states that during this period at a high level Eisenhower administration policy meeting, then-Secretary of State John Foster Dulles complained about the problems caused by Nasser. According to the source, CIA Director Allen Dulles asked if there were anything the agency might do, and his brother replied that the CIA should "eliminate that problem."

The source recalls, "Well, 'eliminate' between two brothers had a different connotation. So the word went out and the agency fielded three different Arab assassination teams."

One of them never got off the ground; another was picked up going across the border; and the third got lost. Meanwhile, months had gone by since the first meeting, and another national security session was going on. Foster was again complaining about Nasser, and Allen said, "Don't worry. We're going to get that problem eliminated for you. We've still got one team floating." The whole room went into a turmoil, and the word went out to stop the team. "It was a legitimate misinterpretation."

The Church committee came up against similar semantic "misinterpretations" in its efforts to unravel lines of authority in other CIA murder plots, and in fact it warned in its assassination report of the dangers caused by "circumlocution or euphemism to describe serious matters—such as assassination—when precise meanings ought to be made clear." But in the matter of Nasser, the committee never had a chance to examine who had—as the bureaucrats say—"signed off" on the plot because the CIA would not provide any information on the subject.

This failure of the CIA to be straightforward points up a

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