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Back out Into the Cold

Washington.

A STRONG POSSIBILITY is growing on Capitol Hill that there will be a favorable turn this year in the melancholy fortunes of the Central Intelligence Agency.

We may—and that word “may” has to be emphasized—we may soon begin to see a revitalization of an agency that for five years has suffered a fate it never deserved.

If this prospect materializes, something good, at least, will have

By James J. Kilpatrick

emerged from the mess in the Middle East. Under wise safeguards, not fatuous ones, the CIA may be able to resume covert operations clearly in the national interest.

There seems to be a growing sentiment both on Capitol Hill and in the White House that the time has come to repeal the Hughes-Ryan amendment of 1974. This alone would not breathe life back into the demoralized CIA, but it would surely help.

By way of background: During the last couple of years of the Nixon administration, the CIA became the target of pacifists and idealists who saw the agency as an unrestrained monster. I do not question the sincerity or the good intentions of Senator Frank Church of Idaho, who came to symbolize the campaign against the CIA. I do emphatically question his judgment.

He was convinced that the agency had to come in from the cold; he wanted its covert operations severely restricted if not halted altogether. Though he sought conscientiously to prevent disclosure of the CIA's names and sources, he cherished the naive notion that it would be better—more democratic, you know—to let it all hang out.

Thus began the systematic, senseless dismantling of an intelligence agency that had been the best in the world. In December of 1974, as an amendment to the Foreign Aid Act, Congress approved a provision sponsored by Harold Hughes of Iowa in the Senate and by Leo Ryan of California in the House. This is what it said:

“No funds appropriated under the authority of this or any other act may be expended by or on behalf of the CIA for operations in foreign countries, other than activities intended solely for obtaining necessary intelligence, unless and until the President finds that each such operation is important to the national security and reports, in a timely fashion, a description and scope of such operation to the appropriate committees of the Congress.”

There turned out to be eight such “appropriate” committees on the Hill. Each of the committees has a large staff. Faced with the virtual certainty of massive leaks, President Ford threw in the towel. President Carter, who suffered until quite recently from qualms and delusions, followed in the paths of innocence that Frank Church had established.

Mr. Carter's choice to head the CIA, Admiral Stansfield Turner, fired 800 CIA officers and pushed another 2,000 into retirement. Nothing very good has happened to the CIA since then.

That the CIA made some gross mistakes in the period before Hughes-Ryan, no one denies, though some of us will continue to believe that the CIA's role in Chile between 1964 and 1973 was not as diabolical as The New York Times would have us believe.

The CIA politicked quite effectively on behalf of the Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei in 1964 and almost succeeded in preventing the Marxist Salvador Allende from winning his one-point plurality in 1970.

Through its own covert operations, the Soviet Union was doing precisely the same kind of thing the CIA was doing. No apologies are called for. The Soviets put their man in power and brought chaos on the country. The anti-Allende coup of 1973 would have developed if the CIA had spent its time on tea and crumpets.

Few observers would give the president—any president—unrestrained power to conduct covert paramilitary operations through the CIA. But in the kind of world we live in, a world increasingly imperiled by aggressive Soviet expansion, it makes no sense to fight fire with water pistols.

We ought to repeal Hughes-Ryan and limit presidential confidences to the two intelligence committees only. Such a move would provide a useful first step on a long road back.

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