

# Cover in Unconventional Operations

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*Broad reflections on the role of concealment in unconventional warfare and other clandestine operations.*

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Mr. James Thurber, reviewing a book about caterpillars, complained that "the author has told me more about the caterpillar than I wished to know." Prospective readers of this paper are promised no such exhaustive or exhausting treatment, but some remarks on cover and concealment seem appropriate at a time when studies are in progress looking toward a more effective and better polished conduct of unconventional warfare operations.

Unconventional operations, bellicose or otherwise, if they are to retain the conspiratorial and secret attributes they have had in the past, bespeak cover and concealment, at least in their organizational stages and sometimes through their entire life cycle. Cover is almost always necessary for the protection of conspiracy and conspirators as they organize for action. If surprise is to play any part in the fruition of the conspiracy, cover is a useful and sometimes a necessary ingredient in mounting the action. And if for political reasons abroad the government sponsorship or perpetration of the action is not to be revealed, then cover is a *sine qua non* throughout. Cover affords protection against counteraction either of a direct sort or through mobilization of adverse public opinion.

Cover is therefore a consideration to be weighed in connection with any examination or re-examination of the modus of unconventional operations. It is not, of course, the only pertinent consideration; for one thing, it is never quite separable from other pervasive protective elements of the operational plan, particularly security and counterintelligence. But cover and concealment

are worth singling out here as one aspect of unconventional operation sometimes obscured by the complexity of the whole.

## Cover as Integral to Planning

A major point to be emphasized is that cover, the assumption of some ostensible legitimate status to conceal the hand of intelligence or operations personnel and protect their activities, must be treated as an integral part of the plan for the conduct of any clandestine operation. It does not fall into the category of a support factor on the peripheral framework of the plan nor is it an element solely of its executional phase. Such views are intrinsic hazards to the basic philosophy of clandestine operation. Cover is a determining element; in the plan itself, and a sound concept of its application must be worked out in advance. All persons responsible for the execution of the plan must know the "legend" beforehand, and during the execution they must accept the discipline it requires and adhere to the regimen it imposes.

Because of this burden of maintaining cover and the hazards of exposure,<sup>1</sup> if for no other reason, clandestine procedure should not be adopted for an action unless the national interest clearly demands it. For once it is decided that an operation is to be clandestine, there is no recourse in its execution from this burden and these hazards.

An example of operational cover consistently maintained is the Soviet deployment of a trawler fleet into international waters, including the sea lanes of the Western powers. Whatever the plan of clandestine operations for this fleet may be, the cover of commercial fishing is an integral part of it. When suspicions have been voiced that the "fishing" is of a peculiar surreptitious kind, the Russians have steadfastly maintained a position of international legality and rectitude. The fishing legend is always vigorously reasserted, and it is accepted by those who are inclined to believe the best of the Bulwark of Socialist Society. In adopting this cover the Russians apparently considered protection against adverse public opinion worth the cost -- in men, money, materials, and planning effort -- of creating for their clandestine activity this elaborate equipment identified with peacetime pursuits.

As corollary to the proposition that cover is integral to the concept of an operation, it follows that the conduct of the operation must be shaped to fit its cover legend. For one thing, personnel overtly connected with the operating agency, or with other government agencies and departments, can play only a limited role in the execution of a clandestine operation, one that permits them to remain in the background unidentifiable with the plan or its execution.<sup>2</sup> And the drive to "get things done" must frequently give way to measured, often cumbersome, sometimes inefficient, methods necessary to

preserve the cover legend.

Extemporization of cover in the conduct of a clandestine operation must be closely controlled and in each instance carefully evaluated in relation to the totality of the coverture. Cover contrived empirically for an act ancillary to a planned operation may conveniently cover the act but at the same time be inimical to or inconsistent with the cover legend; coverture of the part may tend to expose the whole. For example, the purchase of expensive equipment by a "private citizen" for cash may hide the identity of the buyer but may create a whirlwind of conjecture in the business community, leading to a consensus, particularly if the purchase is one of a series of suspicious incidents, that the cover legend is an official contrivance. Even in an agency composed of civilians trained in the use of cover, it is a formidable task to enforce unremitting application of a cover legend in the face of more expeditious ways of "getting on with the job." Within a military structure, the accommodation to such an inhibiting factor poses an even graver problem to personnel trained in traditional methods of direct action.

## **Magnitude and Concealment**

Since requirements for concealment may vary according to circumstance, cover may be considered a variable both qualitatively and quantitatively. It may vary qualitatively according to the depth of concealment required by political considerations, and also quantitatively with the size of the operation or the nature of the support available for it. Operations undertaken in a favorable political climate and with the tacit consent of the local government may require only a thin veil to conform to political niceties, whereas those mounted under a hostile regime may require the ultimate in concealment.

With respect to size and complexity, it may be said that in general the smaller the operation in terms of men, money, and materials, the better the chance for its complete coverture. Some large operations are of such a nature that they may be covered up to a given point in their unfoldment but then inevitably become apparent. For these a judgment must be made as to whether the advantages of a temporary cover legend are worth the effort entailed and any ill effects of the subsequent exposure. The sheer magnitude of a given operation sometimes limits the reliance that can be placed on cover and concealment, but even here particular aspects of the whole may be cloaked by the controlled use of physical security, surprise, and operational deception, as well as cover. When all tricks of the trade are skillfully applied, much can be accomplished, probably more than is realized by the current crop of expostulators who seek the public ear and eye. In this broad sense remarkably good coverture was attained for many aspects of the largest operation in which this nation ever participated, Overlord.

There are of course other limiting influences on cover and concealment besides the magnitude of the operation—geography, for example, if we speak of an infiltration operation. It goes without saying that a cross-border operation from a contiguous wooded area can be concealed much more easily than a penetration from across a large intervening stretch of water, sand, or exposed flatland. In addition, ethnological and ecological limitations play their part. These latter have been well debated and categorized in the past and this information is available for future guidance.

It is, however, the limitations imposed by magnitude and complexity that undoubtedly need re-examination and debate at this point. We came out of World War II with some fairly firm ideas on the limitations inherent in clandestine operations by their very nature, particularly those of the kind undertaken by the early Resistance, based largely on hope with little assurance of ultimate deliverance from the Nazis. The dogma of small, compartmented units and closely held knowledge, so painfully achieved at that time, seems of late to have lost its currency. We have fallen into habits of thought which permit covert operations to take on any degree of magnitude from the deployment of a solitary agent to actions involving hundreds of people.

But it is not our purpose here to prejudge the problem of scope and magnitude; it should be the subject; of a careful and well-paced examination, which should at the same time consider the inhibitions imposed on unconventional operations by the necessity of maintaining a benignant world opinion. In the process of any such evaluation, however, we must especially guard against any tendency to derogate the very concept of the use of covert operations in the nation's interest.

Having begun these reflections with a quotation from a prophet of joy, we might end with comment on one from a prophet of gloom. A columnist in the *Washington Post* of 9 May 1961 was moved to say, "It is not possible for a free and open society to organize successfully a spectacular conspiracy. The United States, like every other government, must employ secret agents. But the United States cannot successfully conduct large secret conspiracies. It is impossible to keep them secret."

A free society may not be able to organize a "spectacular conspiracy," for that is an outright contradiction in terms. But as a nation we can do just about all we need to do in the way of conspiracy -- if it is carefully planned with due regard to the integrality of its elements, if the plan is continuously weighed against the consequences of failure, and if it is executed with the required care and deliberation. Our freedom was gained in substantial part by conspiratorial action; in the same fashion much can be done to keep it.

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1 The usual agents of exposure are not only enemy counterintelligence services, but also friendly counterintelligence services, newsmen with exaggerated zeal, and fellow citizens competing in the cover capacity or just infected with one-upmanship.

2 Although it is almost a truism, it is perhaps worth repeating that once an individual, however well qualified for a particular assignment, is publicly identified with a government department or agency, there are no mechanics of disassociation that can assure him protection from identification by hostile intelligence services and propagandists, or for that matter by friendly enemies.

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