The Enduring Myths Of Covert Action

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Covert action consists of secret government attempts to influence events overseas through the use of propaganda, political and economic operations, and paramilitary (war-like) activities. In this essay, Loch K. Johnson, the Regents Professor of Public and International Affairs at the University of Georgia punctures fourteen myths that have distorted the public’s understanding of this hidden approach to American foreign policy. Despite the drawbacks associated with covert action, the central argument of this essay is that the United States needs this veiled capability for emergencies, but that it ought to be used in a more discriminating manner.

Covert action is among the most tightly held operational secrets in the United States government. This fact presents a daunting challenge to researchers, not to mention to democratic theory and its requirement of an informed citizenry. A sufficient number of government reports, intelligence memoirs, and interviews with practitioners have surfaced since 1975, however, to provide some insight into the conduct of America’s secret foreign policy. Yet one must be cautious with this literature because it is replete with myths, beginning with the basics of definition.¹

Myth No. 1: The meaning of covert action is clearly delineated.

The first myth has to do with the false notion that the borders of covert action have been carefully mapped. With the Intelligence Authorization Act of 1991, the government did (at last) craft a formal statutory definition of covert action as “an activity or activities of the United States government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United State Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly.” Put more simply, covert actions consist of secret governmental attempts to influence events overseas through the use of propaganda, political and economic operations, and paramilitary (war-like) activities.

The concept of secret influence is spongy, though. A range of diplomatic and military objectives have seeped into this definition, often blurring the distinction between hidden activities run by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), on the one hand, and by diplomats and the military, on the other hand. Defenders of the Iran-contra affair in the 1980s argued, for example, that the Reagan administration’s concealed support for “freedom fighters” in Nicaragua (by way of privately raised funds) was really a matter of “secret diplomacy,” not covert action. They reasoned that since the leaders of Nicaragua were aware of the CIA’s involvement in the affair, the operation could not truly be considered a covert action. Lawmakers, who were kept in the dark about this scandal until it leaked to the media in 1986, responded that operation’s secrecy, reliance on the CIA, and goal of influencing events in Iran and Central America made it indisputably a covert action.²

¹ The debunking of myths that follows here grew out of a brief essay by the author, entitled “The Myths of America’s Shadow War” and published by The Atlantic.Com (January 2013), 1-5.
Further, the Pentagon has crept into the covert action terrain by disguising its “special operations” as traditional military activities. One illustration is the military training of foreign covert forces carried out by U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF), which sometimes fields soldiers acting out of uniform and on an unacknowledged basis – precisely the kind of activity engaged in by the CIA under the rubric of covert action.

By calling such activities (and even assassination operations using drones against terrorists outside of a battlefield setting) “traditional military operations,” the Pentagon is able to sidestep the formal legal procedures for reporting to Congress on proposed covert actions. As a result of the Hughes-Ryan Act of 1974, these procedures require presidential endorsement by way of a signed “finding,” as well as notification to the two congressional Intelligence Committees. In contrast, all the military brass has to do is claim its soldiers are engaged in a “war against terrorism” and the Hughes-Ryan requirements melt away. These definitional obfuscations have allowed diplomats and generals to evade the Hughes-Ryan safeguards established to supervise the veiled side of foreign policy.

**Myth No. 2: Covert action offers a quiet approach to America’s foreign relations.**

An appealing aspect of covert action is the promise that the United States may be able to address vexing problems abroad in a quiet manner, without the target nation or group overseas realizing that Washington, DC is the silent hand behind the ill-fate that has visited them. Indeed, one of the euphemisms for covert action inside the U.S. government is “the quiet option.”

Some covert actions fulfill this expectation. Throughout the Cold War, for instance, the CIA planted propaganda in foreign newspapers and magazines, as well as in radio and TV programs around the globe – upwards of eighty covert media insertions a day at the height of the Cold War. Most of these efforts went smoothly, with the U.S. government’s sponsorship undetected. Nonetheless, even in the realm of secret propaganda, the wheels periodically came off the wagon in a noisy manner. In the early 1970s, for example, the CIA’s backing of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty leaked to the world. So did the ties of the Agency (as the CIA is known by insiders) to selected American publishing houses that printed anti-Soviet works for the government. These revelations called into question the independence of U.S. media outlets and tarnished America’s reputation for having a “free press.”

Noisier still were various economic and paramilitary covert actions, such as the disastrous attempt by the CIA to overthrow the Castro regime in 1961 through a “secret” invasion that began and quickly ended at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba; or the use of mines to blow up shipping in Nicaraguan harbors two decades later. Nothing quiet about these operations, or the CIA’s paramilitary ventures in a host of other countries from Southeast Asia in the 1960s and Southwest Asia in the 1980s to the counterterrorism operations of today. Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs or drones) may fly silently, but there is nothing quiet about the explosions made by Hellfire missiles when they strike targets on the ground.

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Myth No. 3: Covert action presents an attractive alternative to reliance on America’s diplomats or Marines.

Diplomacy can be maddeningly slow and often ineffectual; and sending in the Marines is about as noisy as American foreign policy can get. In between is the so-called Third Option – another euphemism for covert action. Framing foreign policy options in this manner, though, sets up an inertia inside the government that too often carries the United States toward the use of covert action, while slighting other options that might merit greater consideration.

Beyond diplomacy, armed force, and covert action is the option of doing nothing – not a bad idea at times for a nation that has been bruised both physically and fiscally by endless interventions aboard, overt and covert. Often other nations or regions must, and should, determine their own destinies, free of superpower meddling. Setting a good example – as by honoring the principles of a free press, eschewing torture and extraordinary rendition, and providing detainees with the rights of habeas corpus – can do more to win friends and admiration abroad than scores of diplomatic negotiations or armed interventions. Economic statecraft offers another promising set of options, whether through the establishment of trade relations, the use of sanctions, or the extension of development assistance that reaches into villages from Pakistan to Nigeria with help in the construction of health clinics, schools, and clean water facilities.

Myth No. 4: Covert actions undergo rigorous government review before they are implemented.

This myth had limited validity prior to 1975, when covert action approvals frequently consisted of nothing more than a secure telephone conversation between the director of the CIA and the national security adviser in the White House. The Church Committee, led by Senator Frank Church (D, Idaho), discovered in 1975 that only about 14 percent of all covert actions from 1961 to 1975 had been authorized by the National Security Council (NSC). The Committee concluded that these ambiguous arrangements were intentional, designed to protect the president and to blur accountability – the infamous doctrine of plausible deniability, whereby unelected bureaucrats decided when and where covert actions would occur, all in the name of keeping the president’s hands clean.

In 1974, Congress threw this doctrine out the window and, with enactment of the Hughes-Ryan amendment, required formal presidential approval of covert actions and notification to the congressional Intelligence Committees. Today, the review of covert action proposals is far more thorough than during the earlier era of benign neglect. Nonetheless, a rigorous review continues to remain elusive. One of the chief obstacles has been the presidential use of “generic” or “worldwide” findings. The word “finding” refers to the president’s formal approval of a covert action; the president must “find” that a certain covert action is important and warrants his approval. The expectation on Capitol Hill is that a finding will be accompanied by a fulsome and specific accounting of the proposed operation, so that lawmakers can evaluate its appropriateness.

With generic or worldwide findings, specificity is abandoned; the wording of a presidential approval becomes an open-ended opportunity to engage in covert action, as the CIA defines it.

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The finding might provide the Agency with authority “to fight global terrorism.” This broad language could be interpreted to mean almost anything, with *carte blanche* to carry out operations anywhere, anytime. In contrast, a more accountable finding would say something like this: the CIA has authority “to engage in clandestine radio broadcasts from Afghanistan, transmitted throughout northwestern Pakistan for the next six months.” Here are the details (ideally accompanied by cost and risk estimates) that would allow proper oversight by lawmakers.

The benchmark of rigorous review frequently collapses, too, at the time when Congress is notified about a covert action approval. This notification takes place via separate briefings to both the House and Senate Intelligence Committees. Often the intelligence briefers (the CIA director or a designee) try to slip by with thin explanations when appearing before the Committees in closed session. Lawmakers present at the briefings must flesh out the details through questioning; sometimes they perform this important duty and sometimes they don’t.

Timing is important, as well. Hughes-Ryan originally provided for *ex post facto* reporting to lawmakers on a finding. “In a timely manner,” was the prescription, which was interpreted by Congress to mean within a day. In 1980, the Intelligence Oversight Act upped the ante-to-ante facto reporting – before the covert action went into effect. This was a powerful form of review adopted by lawmakers, although the provision included a temporary escape hatch: in emergency situations, the CIA director could limit advanced reporting to only eight leaders of Congress (“the Gang of Eight” – four leaders of the Intelligence Committees and the four top leaders in the House and the Senate). Within a day, however, the CIA was required to follow-up with a briefing to the full membership on each of the Intelligence Committees. Yet since 1980, presidents have sometimes chosen to report only to the Gang of Eight; or, worse, only to a Gang of Four lawmakers. And, sometimes, to a Gang of Zero. During the Iran-contra scandal targeted at Nicaragua, for example, the Congress received no reports whatsoever about this most notorious of all the CIA’s covert actions.

**Myth No. 5: The approval and review process for covert action is excessively cumbersome and harmful to the nation’s need for quick responses to challenges overseas.**

Some intelligence officials long for the good old days before the Church Committee, Hughes-Ryan, and subsequent laws related to covert action made life more complicated for the CIA. Better the simple telephone call to the national security adviser than the hurdles posed by findings and congressional notifications. The end result of this congressional “micromanagement,” according to this nostalgic view, is to slow down the Agency in the conduct of its important obligation to thwart dangers from abroad. “What we need is horsepower, not brakes!” an exasperated senior CIA officer said to me soon after the Church Committee recommended tighter supervision of the Agency in 1976.

In fact, though, the Hughes-Ryan procedures can move with alacrity when necessary, thanks to a link-up of secure telephones that allows quick communication among the CIA director, the president, and other key players responsible for discussing and green-lighting a covert action. The briefings to Congress can be expedited, as well, through the Gang of Eight provision, which allows for rapid action during times of crises. The advantages of the Hughes-Ryan procedures and their “democratization” of covert action greatly outweigh the only slightly faster informal methods of earlier days. Appropriately, the pernicious doctrine of plausible deniability has been
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discarded, replaced by a clear paper trail of responsibility leading directly to the Oval Office. Such accountability is vital to democracy. During the Iran-contra affair, the national security adviser told investigators that he had bypassed Congress because he “didn’t want any outside interference.” According to the Constitution, however, Congress is part of the government – indeed, it serves (along with the media) as a vital check on executive branch power. Hughes-Ryan brought other elected representatives into the covert-action decision loop: lawmakers on the Intelligence Committees, not just the president. This legislative measure introduced at least a modicum of democracy into the dark side of American government, providing a safeguard against wrong-minded decisions by the executive branch.

Those who place a premium strictly on efficiency may rue the development of a wider circle of accountability for intelligence activities; but, those wary of power and its potential abuse – that is, anyone who has studied history – will view the added precaution of the findings process as a prudential extension of democratic governance.

Myth No. 6: The U.S. government closely monitors covert actions as they are implemented.

This myth is particularly risible for covert actions carried out under the rubric of a generic finding. When overseers are unclear about the scope of a covert action in the first place, they are unable to track its path during the implementation phase. Even when a finding is specific, the challenges of maintaining accountability in the field are considerable. Clark Clifford, an adviser to Presidents Truman and Johnson, told the Church Committee:

“I believe on a number of occasions, a plan for covert action has been presented to the NSC and authority is requested for the CIA to proceed from point A to point B. The authority will be given and the action will be launched. When point B is reached, the persons in charge feel it is necessary to go to point C, and they assume that the original authorization gives them such a right From point C, they go to D and possibly E, and even further.”

Clifford’s testimony underscores the importance of specific findings with little fudge room. In addition, intelligence managers down the chain-of-command must strike the right balance between providing flexibility in the field, on the one hand, with adherence to the intentions of the original finding, on the other hand. A covert action manager in Afghanistan has written: “... the [CIA’s covert action] teams often could respond more quickly and effectively [in Afghanistan in recent years], sometimes before we in HQS even knew what action they were taking. This was more than OK – it was what I wanted. The field leaders demonstrated flat, networked intelligence collaboration and covert action at its best.” While it is important to avoid the stifling of initiative in the field, if carried too far, this philosophy of management can lead to some CIA officers carrying their “authority” too far.

Probably no one in the Kennedy White House would have dreamed the CIA would hire the Mafia to help with its assassination plans against Fidel Castro. And who would have surmised that CIA

5 Hearings, Joint Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran (the Inouye-Hamilton Committee), U.S. Congress (July 1987), 159.
Director William J. Casey would involve elements of the Agency in the illegal Iran-contra activities? Especially troubling of late is the CIA’s recruitment of private companies to carry out intelligence operations overseas. Here the chain-of-command and the lines of accountability are notably vague; and the actors are less likely to be socialized into the relatively new norms of intelligence-under-the-law, as required by reforms in the post-Church Committee era. To guard against CIA rogue behavior, lawmakers on the Intelligence Committees and their staff have an obligation to stay on top of covert actions as they unfold, not just when they are approved and reported to lawmakers in Washington at the findings stage.

Myth No. 7: Covert action has the virtue of allowing the United States to act alone in foreign affairs.

Diplomacy and the use of military force normally involve many countries. In the case of global environmental treaties, well over a hundred nations now gather periodically for negotiations. The recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, though mainly U.S. initiatives, have included dozens of nations operating as an anti-terrorist coalition (many induced to participate by assurances of U.S. foreign aid in exchange). These are major enterprises that require enormous amounts of funding, diplomatic skill, and investments of time. In contrast, covert action seems to offer an opportunity for unilateral action: the United States moving with secrecy, dispatch, and no extra weight.

In reality, covert actions of any consequence – particularly paramilitary operations – turn out to be complex undertakings. The CIA’s covert wars in Laos from 1962-1968 and against the Soviet military in Afghanistan during the 1980s swallowed large amounts of financial resources and preoccupied the Agency for years. Nor can the United States operate alone in covert ventures of any scope. Indeed, a fundamental tenant of success in this domain is the need to have a competent ally inside the target nation. In Laos, the ally was the Hmung tribesmen, fierce anti-communist warriors; in Afghanistan during the 1980s, the ally was the anticommunist mujahideen (who unfortunately grew into the Taliban regime that provided a safe haven for Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda terrorist organization). One of the most successful U.S. covert actions was the routing of the Taliban and Al Qaeda from Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. A sine qua non for this victory was the internal assistance of the Northern Alliance, a tribe of Afghans who also opposed the Taliban. Covert actions of any scale do not occur in a vacuum; they can have many moving parts and are rarely a quick and easy solution – the beguiling come-on of secrecy notwithstanding.

Myth No. 8: Covert action offers an inexpensive fix to foreign policy dilemmas.

Another misconception about covert action is that it is inexpensive. Of course, practically any approach to America’s recent woes in Iraq and Afghanistan would have been cheaper than the $2-to-3 trillion price tag the U.S. taxpayers will have paid for these overt military interventions when all the dust settles. Sometimes costly overt wars are unavoidable, as the brutal actions of the Axis powers properly persuaded the United States in 1941. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that covert actions are always a cheap date.

True, some small-scale operations are reasonably priced. The fee for placing a U.S. propaganda article into a foreign newspaper through a recruited media asset is low (but limited in impact as well). Large-scale political, economic, and paramilitary operations, however, can run into
millions of dollars – even billions when toting up the costs of covert interventions in such places as Korea and Vietnam (1950-1953 and 1965-1973, respectively, in harness with America’s military intervention); Nicaragua and Afghanistan (the 1980s); and, most recently, Iraq and Afghanistan (as complements to the overt U.S. wars in these nations). When President Truman established the CIA in 1947, covert action was merely the tail on the dog – and not even mentioned in the founding National Security Act of that year. Since then, the tail has frequently wagged the dog and the cash register for covert action keeps ringing.

Myth No. 9: Covert action is resorted to only in extreme circumstances that threaten the United States.

The significant expenses of covert action would be more tolerable if this approach were limited to operations designed to protect the United States from parlous circumstances; but the record shows that Washington officials have resorted to this secret approach far beneath that standard. Frequently the targets have been small, weak countries. For example, during the Cold War, America’s nemesis was the Soviet Union and its satellite states in Eastern Europe. Yet few covert actions were directed against this empire, outside of efforts to infiltrate pro-Western propaganda behind the Iron Curtain. Instead, any developing nation that had the temerity to ally or even flirt with the USSR became a target, however remote the chances these locations truly represented a genuine threat to the United States. Chile is a well-known example, with its democratically elected government led by President Allende targeted by the Nixon administration for a coup d’état during the 1970s.

As historian Michael Grow has written with respect to CIA interventions in Latin America, “Cold War presidents and their senior advisers believed that a passive U.S. response to Marxist or otherwise unfriendly regimes in the Western Hemisphere would create a perception of U.S. weakness in the eyes of the international community, with potentially serious long-range consequences for the nation’s security.”

The guiding philosophy became as simple as ABC: Anybody But Communists. Yet most of these countries were driven by a deep sense of nationalism, not communism (although some accepted foreign aid from Moscow when turned down by the United States). One can only wonder how much more successful other options would have been in winning over nations in the developing world, such as foreign aid, trade inducements, student and cultural exchanges, and patient diplomacy conducted with a hearing aid rather than a bullhorn.

Myth No. 10: Covert action is driven by the imperatives of U.S. security, rather than bureaucratic politics.

The reality is that covert action can be strongly influenced by the personal agendas of ambitious bureaucrats, not just the security interests of the United States. The classic case is Richard M. Bissell, Jr., a senior official during the 1960s in the Directorate of Operations, home of the CIA’s Covert Action Staff (CAS) during the Cold War. (The Directorate of Operations has since been renamed the National Clandestine Service.) According to Peter Wyden’s exhaustive study of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Bissell pushed this covert action on John F. Kennedy in hopes of impressing

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the President by removing the Castro regime – a persistent irritant to the administration. The payoff to Bissell (or so he hoped): promotion to CIA director. Never mind that the Cuban analysts at the Agency considered the proposal doomed to failure from the start.

The Covert Action Staff is brimming with professional intelligence officers with grandiose schemes about how their tradecraft can transform the world and, at the same time, accelerate their own careers. As revealed by the Church Committee, some of these ideas have been madcap, from an exploding cigar for Castro’s consumption to “Operation Elimination by Illumination,” also aimed at Cuba. In this plan, U.S. submarines would surface off the island’s coastline, firing star shells into the midnight sky. The CIA’s assets in Havana and the countryside would simultaneously spread the word that “Christ has come! Rise up against the anti-Christ!” This Second Coming would supposedly lead to the overthrow of Castro, the anti-Christ. President Kennedy’s aides, no doubt shaking their heads and wondering what people were smoking at CIA Headquarters, halted this initiative before its launch date.

Myth No. 11: Covert action can be implemented in a surgical manner.

Another one of the fantasies about covert action is that it can be used with high precision, as a surgeon would wield a scalpel. A problem overseas? Send in the Covert Action Staff and the problem will be handled without a trace of evidence implicating the United States. Fed up with the leader of Iran in 1953? Send in the CIA (this time working with Britain’s MI6) and replace him with a more reliable puppet – the Shah. This particular operation did proceed with surprising smoothness, at least over the short run. Over the longer run, the Shah proved highly unpopular with his own people and was thrown out of office, replaced by religious mullahs hateful toward the United States then and ever since. Many other operations have been anything but precise or contained, even over the short run.

Covert propaganda, for instance, presents the problem of “blow back” – an intelligence term referring to the risk that stories planted overseas by the CIA may be inadvertently reported back to the United States, say, by a New York Times correspondent in a foreign capital who is unaware that a local newspaper article has been placed there by an Agency asset. The Times reporter incorporates elements of this piece in his own dispatch and, in this manner, the American people become the victims of U.S. government propaganda. Using the phrase blow back more generally, some observers have argued that covert actions can have a still broader negative effect on America’s standing in the world. The CIA’s assassination plots against Castro and Lumumba, for example, stained the nation’s reputation for behaving better than the Soviet KGB, rather than like this communist intelligence organization widely known for its brutality. The efforts to overthrow Allende raised further questions about America’s apparent willingness to attack fellow democracies, not just authoritarian and totalitarian regimes.

Current day assassination operations against suspected terrorists, carried out by the CIA and the Pentagon using Predators and other drones armed with missiles, are viewed by Washington officials as a covert action tool that, if not surgically precise, is at least far less likely to injure or

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kill civilians than an open military invasion. Though a valid consideration, this comparison fails to negate the fact that many civilians have been accidentally killed by U.S. drone attacks.\footnote{See, for example, Mark Mazzetti, Charlie Savage, and Scott Shane, “A U.S. Citizen, in America’s Cross Hairs,” \textit{New York Times} (March 10, 2013), A1.} There is nothing surgically precise about current drone policy, which elides such fundamental questions as where (on what battlefields) the drones may legitimately operate, the criteria for selecting individuals for inclusion on the hit list, or how proper accountability will be maintained – all the way from target selection through the pulling of the trigger (by distant remote control) on the Hellfire missiles.

On the matter of accountability, President Obama conceded on Jon Stewart’s “The Daily Show” in October of 2012 that “one of the things we’ve got to do is put a legal architecture in place – and we need congressional help in order to do that – to make sure that not only am I reined in, but any president is reigned in.” The President’s top counterterrorism adviser, John O. Brennan (now CIA director), said publically during his Senate confirmation hearings in February of 2013 that great care goes into the use of drones. Nonetheless, it remains unclear whether each targeted individual requires a presidential finding, or if a generic finding allows wide discretion to the CIA and the Pentagon in the targeting of suspected terrorists. Even the rules for the targeting of known Americans abroad are murky, leading many legal authorities to call for the establishment of a special review court of jurists to decide on the merits of a presidential request to kill a U.S. citizen – judicial accountability brought into the process, just as it was for national security wiretaps in 1978 with the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA).

Troubling, too, is a new category of targets, so-called signature strikes: individuals who have not been specifically identified as terrorists, but who may be found in an area—say, northwestern Pakistan – that suggests they could be bad actors. Killing people without knowing who they are, or what they have done or intend to do, may harm the United States and its allies. In any case, it is a far departure from the use of covert action as a scalpel.

Myth No. 12: The likely outcomes of covert action can be accurately calibrated.

As former Secretary of State Dean Rusk often reminded me when we were colleagues at the University of Georgia, “Providence has not provided mankind with the capacity to pierce the fog of the future.” Covert action planners are chiefly guessing what the outcomes of their endeavors will be, especially years down the road. The Shah may have looked like a good alternative for Iran (or, more accurately, for the United States and the United Kingdom) in 1953. Glancing back, former CIA Director William E. Colby offered this evaluation when interviewed by television host Larry King on February 2, 1987: “The assistance to the Shah…was an extremely good move which gave Iran twenty-five years of progress before he was overthrown. Twenty-five years is no small thing.” Neither, he might have added, was a pro-Western leader in the Middle East who provided a quarter-century of low prices for Americans at their gas pumps. Yet the identification of the United States with the Shah, whose secret police (Savak) tortured dissenters, has had a long-term negative effect, beginning with the Revolution of 1979 that overthrew the Shah and installed a fundamentalist religious regime.

The CIA coup in Guatemala in 1954 may have looked sensible, too, at the time – especially to the United Fruit Company, which feared that the existing regime might expropriate its holdings or
charge more at the source for the marketing of bananas in the United States. The profit margin of the United Fruit Company aside, journalist Anthony Lewis reported that the CIA coup began “a long national descent into savagery” for Nicaragua that lasted over thirty years.  

The CIA also guided a large-scale paramilitary operation in Laos during the 1960s. The short-term results were impressive, as the Agency helped the Hmung (or Meo) tribesmen in the north resist a takeover by the North Vietnamese and their local puppets, the Pathet Lao. The fighting kept the communists at bay for eight years (1962-1968) in Laos; but, when the CIA departed, the Hmung eventually found themselves (as CIA Director Colby summed up in his memoir) “in exile, dead, or living under oppression.”

When the CIA helped the mujahideen drive out the Soviets from Afghanistan in the 1980s (by providing them with still-unaccounted-for Stinger missiles, among other forms of aid), the resulting retreat of the Soviet Army catapulted this operation to a place high on the Agency’s list of successful covert actions. At least over the short run. Over the longer run, Afghanistan fell into the hands of Taliban fundamentalists, whom the United States has been fighting since 2001 in America’s longest war.

The CIA’s assassination plots during the Cold War also raise the question of potential value gained. Would the killing of Fidel Castro have changed much in Cuba? His brother, Raúl, would have replaced him (as he eventually did when Fidel grew too old to govern) and, at the time of the plots, the brother was equally truculent toward the United States. Or did the question of whether Patrice Lumumba of the Congo lived or died matter that much to the course of the Cold War – enough for the United States to plan his murder? Unlikely. Moreover, doesn’t the use of assassination against foreign leaders invite other nations to retaliate in kind, with elected officials in the United States and other open societies much more vulnerable than dictators in their armed fortresses? Here is a Pandora’s box best left closed.

**Myth No. 13: Covert action is kept within the boundaries of moral acceptability.**

Each of these myths raises important ethical considerations. Some covert actions have undeniably assisted the cause of freedom around the world. For example, the combined CIA-Navy Seal operation that resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden in 2011 brought a form of justice to the chief sponsor of the 9/11 attacks and further signaled to other terrorists that their foul deeds would be avenged. Further, during the Cold War, efforts by the CIA to provide information about the free world to those trapped behind the Iron Curtain brought some hope to the suppressed citizens of the Soviet bloc. Moreover, the CIA’s assistance to the Christian Democratic Party in Italy during the 1960s, in its political struggles against the Italian Communist Party, did much to keep that nation free and an important partner in NATO. At the same time, though, many of America’s covert actions have fallen on the down side of any moral evaluation.

For one thing, the CIA has often abandoned covert action partners in the field, leaving them to an unhappy fate against muscular opponents – like starting a fight in a crowded barroom, then

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ducking out the back door. Among those deserted during the Cold War (from a much longer list) were the Bay of Pigs invaders, the Hmung of Laos, the Khambas in Tibet, and the Nationalist Chinese in Burma – all, in the words of critic Ferdinand Mount in the *National Review*, “so many causes and peoples briefly taken up by the CIA and then tossed aside like broken toys…”

In addition, the assassination plots during the Cold War made the CIA like its chief nemesis, the Soviet KGB. When the Agency established a “Health Alteration Committee” to concoct ways for eliminating disagreeable leaders abroad; when government scientists crafted a poison dart gun (a “non-discriminable micro-bio-inoculator,” in spytalk) and special ballpoint pens that dispensed deadly shellfish toxins; when CIA operatives entered into an alliance with Mafia hitmen, the United States lost sight of its traditional values of honor and fair play.

More recently, the Agency’s drone program has precipitated widespread ethical concern. Reports from Southwest Asia indicate that even pro-Americans in Pakistan (and there are many) question the violation of their nation’s airspace by drone attacks. Pakistani-Americans whom I meet at academic conferences and as students in my university classes uniformly question the morality and legality of these flights and view them as the No. 1 impediment to better relations between the two countries.

One can only wonder with increased anxiety about the future of drone warfare advanced by America’s covert-action planners. Over forty nations now have drones. Here is a domain of shadow warfare begging for the establishment of tighter legal restrictions through an international treaty. In the not-too-distant future lurks the challenge of non-state actors who will certainly attempt to acquire this technology, perhaps arming these silent airplanes with weapons of mass destruction.

During the Cold War, U.S. diplomat George Ball rejected the use of extreme covert action. “When we mine harbors in Nicaragua, we fuzz the difference between ourselves and the Soviet Union,” he said. “We act out of character, which no great power can do without diminishing itself...When we...fight the Russian’s on their own terms and in their own gutter, we make a major mistake and throw away one of our great assets.” Harvard University law professor, Roger Fisher, shared these moral qualms. “When we choose our weapons, let’s choose ones we are good at using – like the Marshall Plan – not ones we are bad at – like the Bay of Pigs,” he advised. “To join some adversaries in the grotesque world of poison dart-guns and covert operations is to give up the most power weapons we have: idealism, morality, due process of law, and belief in the freedoms of others to disagree, including the right of other countries to disagree with ours.”

Today, we must – and we can – fight terrorism without becoming viewed as terrorists ourselves by people around the world.

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16 “Should the CIA Fight Secret Wars?” a roundtable discussion in *Harpers* (September 1984), 37-44.
Myth No. 14: If the veils of secrecy could be lifted, the public would find that covert action works to resolve America’s problems abroad.

Many of these reservations about covert action (some would say all) could be dismissed if this approach to U.S. foreign policy delivered the goods, that is, if it consistently succeeded in protecting and advancing America’s interests in the world. The historical record indicates, however, that this is not the case. The argument that all the really good covert actions remain classified and sealed inside CIA vaults is simply false. Several government investigations have looked into covert action in recent years and the American people know at least the broad outlines about most all of them.

The vast majority of covert actions since the creation of the CIA have been modest in nature, even trivial. More ambitious efforts, such as the Bay of Pigs, have proved unlikely to succeed or to remain covert. Moreover, as illustrated by the cases of the Shah of Iran and support for the Afghan mujahideen, the unanticipated consequences of covert action can come back to haunt the United States. That the United States could have gotten by without the modest covert actions is plausible; that the nation would have been better off without such failures during the Cold War as the Bay of Pigs or the dark stain of assassination plots against Third World figures is self-evident.

The covert action record is not without its successes, however. During the Cold War, a helping hand from the United States to struggling democracies around the world after the World War II – in harmony with overt economic and political assistance – allowed nations in Western Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East to resist communist aggression. Further, CIA propaganda that reinforced a commitment to democratic principles probably strengthened the will of anti-communists around the world. More recently in the aftermath of 9/11, the routing of Al Qaeda and Taliban forces in Afghanistan registered a covert action high mark. Here was an outstanding example of the CIA, Pentagon Special Forces, the U.S. Air Force, and local Afghans in the Northern Alliance working together against terrorists. Also, drone strikes and other small-scale paramilitary operations against Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations have demonstrated success, and they may be more acceptable to Americans (and others) than large-scale, overt military invasions. These drone covert actions cry out, though, for a warrant process and prior judicial review of proposed drone targeting against American citizens, as well as closer monitoring of kill lists by overseers in the executive and legislative branches. Necessary, too, is a redoubling of efforts to avoid civilian casualties through improve intelligence reconnaissance before an attack, and the crafting of limits to global drone operations by way a formal international treaty involving all nations.

Among the hundreds of witnesses who appeared before the Church Committee in 1975, two of the wisest were Clark Clifford and Cyrus Vance. They had accumulated many years of experience in the government at the cabinet level. When asked their opinions about covert action, both embraced a common theme.18 “The guiding criterion,” said Clifford, former secretary of defense and an author of the National Security Act of 1947, “should be the test as to whether or not a certain covert project truly affects our national security.” Vance, who would soon become secretary of state in the Carter administration, told the Committee that “it should be the policy of the United States to engage in covert action only when they are absolutely essential to the

18 Church Committee, “Covert Action,” Hearings, U.S. Senate, October 23, 1975, emphasis added.
national security.” This is central thesis of this essay as well: the United States needs a covert action capability for emergencies, but must become more discriminating in its use.

After the Cold War, a former CIA Director, William Webster (who had also led the FBI) told the Aspin-Brown Commission on Intelligence his rule of thumb for deciding on the worthiness of a covert action proposal. 19 He would ask:

- Is it legal? (That is, in conformity with U.S. laws governing covert action, such as the Hughes-Ryan findings procedure.)
- Is it consistent with American foreign policy, and, if not, why not?
- Is it consistent with American values?
- If it becomes public, will it make sense to the American people?

The Webster guidelines, couple with the caveats of Clifford and Vance, should be placed on the office walls of every covert action planner, as well as in the White House and in the suites of the congressional Intelligence Committees. ■

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