

foreign policy *in focus*



Interhemispheric Resource Center
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Institute for Policy Studies



The Intelligence Apparatus

In 1947 Congress passed the National Security Act that created the controversial Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The CIA was explicitly mandated to coordinate factual, unbiased intelligence gathering and to produce analysis essential to foreign policy decisions. Although the National Security Act did not expressly authorize covert operations, Section 102(d)(5) stated that the CIA “perform such other functions and duties related to intelligence affecting the national security as the National Security Council may from time to time direct.”

The U.S. national security elite seized on this vague clause to justify the CIA’s notoriously interventionist activities. Covert operations, an almost irresistible option for a U.S. president, quickly evolved into a major instrument.

Key Points

- Created to collect information, the CIA quickly became embroiled in covertly upending governments and movements around the world in support of U.S. corporate and political goals.
- Covert operations are authorized by the president and are initiated usually with the knowledge of intelligence committees of the House and Senate.
- The U.S. expends \$30 billion/year in the intelligence budget, closely surveilling the world—by air, phone, and other hi-tech means, and engaging in myriad covert operations.

Within the first six months, a White House directive vastly expanded the CIA’s portfolio to include “preventive direct action,” “sabotage,” “demolition,” and “subversion against hostile states.” Since covert operations involve orchestrating political changes, they inherently tend to override attempts at impartial intelligence gathering.

Covert actions are, almost by definition, illegal and often run counter to laws, treaties, and stated U.S. foreign policy objectives. CIA covert operations have ranged from fomenting political opposition to

manipulating elections, from orchestrating coups to assassinating heads of state. They are supervised both by U.S. agents under false “cover” (diplomatic, business, academic, etc.) and by foreign “assets” and “operatives” who are paid covertly by the CIA.

Since 1974, when several CIA scandals became publicized, the president has had to sign off on covert projects. After a presidential finding, congressional intelligence committees are informed of the action “in a timely manner,” generally in advance of the action.

Congress has created a bevy of other intelligence programs. All intelligence budgets are secret, though speculations on their sizes are routine. The CIA’s annual budget is estimated to be over \$3 billion. The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and the Tactical Intelligence and Related Activities (TIARA) program (with combined budgets of over \$10 billion) directly assist the military services. The National Reconnaissance Office (with over \$6 billion), which conducts satellite surveillance, and the National Security Agency (with over \$4 billion), which handles electronic eavesdropping and code breaking, are both more independent of the military. Other military intelligence expenses are about \$7 billion, bringing the total for all intelligence programs to a currently estimated \$30 billion annually.

These spy agencies collect intelligence data both through key-word computer searches and other forms of electronic surveillance and by monitoring all international phone calls, faxes, telexes, and e-mail. With a network of satellites circling the globe, they compile detailed archives of photographs. Such activities have major privacy, foreign policy, and other consequences not well debated in public.

Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, the overall U.S. intelligence budget has nearly doubled since 1980. After a brief downturn, it is again climbing as spies try to carve out new fields monitoring and countering “rogue” states, terrorists, drug trafficking, and economic espionage. The \$30 billion intelligence budget is \$10 billion higher than all other U.S. foreign relations programs (diplomacy, aid, and information) combined, and spies outnumber diplomats in some U.S. embassies.

While the House and Senate Intelligence Committees approve budgets and activities of the spy agencies, committees are sworn to secrecy in almost all matters. Committee staff are routinely vetted by the intelligence agencies. Only rarely do congressional hearings give the public a peek behind this curtain of secrecy. Since the August 1996 newspaper exposé linking the CIA to the crack cocaine epidemic in America’s inner cities, the public and members of Congress are, once again, demanding a thorough investigation (see *In Focus: The CIA, Contras, Gangs, and Crack*).

Even the intelligence agencies' most benign function—information collection—is frequently flawed. As late as 1989, the CIA failed to forecast the Soviet Union's collapse, even though Moscow had been the focal point of U.S. intelligence activities for four decades. The CIA did not predict the 1979 overthrow of the Shah of Iran, nor the seizure by militant students of the U.S. embassy and 66 U.S. diplomats in Teheran. This hostage crisis is widely credited with costing Jimmy Carter the 1980 presidential election.

The CIA has knowingly relayed false or tainted information to policymakers on a grand scale. In the late 1980's, exaggerated CIA estimates of Soviet military strength led the U.S. government to authorize millions of dollars for unneeded weapons systems. On a smaller scale, in 1994 high CIA sources disinformed congress about the character of then exiled Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

The CIA has long justified its employment of and alliance with unsavory characters—mafia figures, drug traffickers, assassins, military dictators, and other human rights abusers—as the only way to obtain valuable information about illicit activities. The CIA pays informants to report on government corruption, criminal activity, and internal dissent. Often, however, the informants are directly involved in these activities and either withhold information or simply expose the competition. Additionally, the CIA itself often arms and trains assets in methods of torture and assassination—in clear violation of U.S. and international laws.

In Guatemala, for instance, paid CIA informant Col. Julio Alpirez has been implicated in the killings of an American innkeeper, Michael Devine, and a captured rebel commander, Efraín Bamaca, who was married to American lawyer Jennifer Harbury. The CIA's and U.S. Embassy's investigations of these two murders amounted to elaborate and prolonged cover-ups of Alpirez' involvement and his CIA ties.

While the U.S.'s stated foreign policy goal is to promote political and economic freedom, foreigners frequently know the U.S. most intimately for the heinous crimes committed during its covert operations. These include CIA-instigated coups in Iran, Guatemala, Indonesia, and Chile; paramilitary operations against Cuba, Indochina, Afghanistan, Angola, and Central America; and destabilization campaigns against governments in Guyana, Australia, Grenada, Jamaica, and Greece.

Elsewhere, U.S. intelligence agencies have bolstered ruthless dictators and undermined elections, labor struggles, and freedom of the press. Much of central Africa's current slide into regional war is rooted in the CIA-assisted 1960 assassination of popular Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba and in the decades of U.S. support for Mobutu Sese Seko, Zaire's devastatingly corrupt and brutal dictator.

CIA operations have not only run roughshod over

human rights abroad, but have also undermined democracy at home. Under the rubric of national security, U.S. citizens are kept in the dark about most covert operations. Only rarely, such as in the historic Church and Pike Committee hearings in the mid-1970s and in the 1987 Iran contra hearings, does Congress publicly examine CIA misdeeds.

In addition, the U.S. public has suffered from “blow-back” covert operations. Jennifer Harbury, Sister Diana Ortiz (who was raped and tortured by Guatemalan soldiers in the presence, she says, of an American), and the family of Ben Linder (who was killed by CIA financed contras in Nicaragua) are among those Americans who have suffered from covert operations and were then denied access to government files about their cases. The CIA has also spied on U.S. citizens and organizations, carried out secret drug experiments on unwitting patients, and collaborated with drug traffickers to bring narcotics into the U.S.

Because CIA officials abroad operate under cover and it is a crime to reveal their identity, all Americans working abroad are put at risk. Frequently, innocent journalists, missionaries, academics, and Peace Corps workers are wrongly—and dangerously—accused of being CIA agents. Despite protests by all leading journalist organizations, the CIA continues to employ journalist cover “in exceptional circumstances.”

Executive and congressional reforms border on the ludicrous. An executive order permits spying within the U.S. as long as it is not “intended to influence United States political processes, public opinion, policies or media.” The spy agencies can give intelligence “assistance to coup attempts against political leaders who are then assassinated as long as assassination is not the stated goal of the coup.”

In 1994 and 1995, two government studies and a third by the Council on Foreign Relations set out to reform the intelligence community. In the end, however, they meekly endorsed the intelligence agencies' current operations and budget.

Not surprisingly, CIA efforts to police itself have been a dismal failure. In 1992, CIA spy Aldrich Ames was arrested as a Soviet double agent. Ames had, he admitted, sold the CIA's crown jewels by betraying more than 100 U.S. intelligence operations. This led to the execution of at least ten of the CIA's most important penetration agents in the U.S.S.R. Yet CIA Chief James Woolsey issued only the mildest slap on the wrist—eleven letters of reprimand—to CIA officials responsible for Ames.

<h3>Key Problems</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Historically, covert operations have tended to support repressive regimes, led to bloodbaths, and destroyed nascent democratic institutions.• The intelligence apparatus is designed to promote U.S. control rather than cooperation or democracy.• The system lacks accountability for intelligence actions gone amok and for death and destruction inflicted on U.S. citizens or other innocents.

The U.S. intelligence apparatus needs a major overhaul. The programs of the intelligence agencies should be made public and their budgets drastically reduced to correspond with Washington's real post-cold war needs.

The CIA should be abolished.

All covert operations (usually associated with the CIA, but actually carried out by many organizations) should be terminated. The exception should be covert operations that accompany authorized military operations. Covert operations often don't work. Of the dozens of major efforts that have become public, most failed to achieve either their stated long-term or short-term

goals. Instead they have left a trail of misery and, as in Guatemala, Chile, and Indonesia, ushered in decades of brutal dictatorships.

The intelligence agencies are looking for new post-cold war justification in tracking and curbing terrorism, drug trafficking, and economic espionage. The U.S. needs to pursue diplomatic and multilateral solutions to these problems. FBI moves to expand its mission (including its covert operations) abroad should be stopped and it

should be confined to operating within U.S. borders.

The US should resolve disputes through international laws and institutions.

International laws are in place to mediate disputes and regulate human actions. The fact that the UN and other international bodies are increasingly involved in resolving conflicts, even if the U.S. exerts disproportionate control, gives some hope for their growing effectiveness. Where the U.S., in concert with international bodies, determines that forced change is needed and that negotiations or sanctions are impossible, multilateral military or congressionally approved U.S. military actions rather than U.S. covert operations should be used.

The US should gather intelligence overtly, except in rare, pre-approved instances..

International information and analysis needed for making foreign policy decisions can be collected in large part from public sources: newspapers, independent experts, universities, and think tanks at home and abroad. Because these public sources can be openly questioned and debated, they are likely to yield richer and better-informed policy analysis. The current practice of the intelligence institutions covertly funding pro-

fessors and university programs should be eliminated because it undermines academic freedom.

The blanket monitoring of international communications in hopes of stumbling on terrorists, spies, or criminals is an unconscionable invasion of privacy. It should only be authorized in a limited number of specific cases through a presidential finding and with congressional approval and oversight. The National Security Agency should become an international public library under control of the Library of Congress or the National Archives. The most sensitive nonpublic source information should be housed at the State Department and shared with other agencies and Congress.

Embassies and diplomats, rather than covert operatives, should be charged with gathering information. They should primarily use public sources and only in rare instances employ paid informants. They should be barred from using informants who have committed human rights abuses or other crimes. The ambassador should oversee these informants and be required to approve any covert intelligence collection. U.S. officials involved in intelligence collection should be barred from operating under false cover.

Immediate steps that the new administration and Congress should take include:

- Thoroughly investigating major crimes by intelligence agency employees, starting with a full investigation of the CIA involvement in cocaine trafficking.
- Releasing government files pertaining to cases where human rights abuses have been committed, most urgently in cases involving American citizens.
- Appropriately punishing intelligence and covert operations agents who have committed crimes.
- Expanding the president's Intelligence Oversight Board to include human rights experts.
- Declassifying intelligence documents, and withholding names only where a life might be endangered.
- Revising or abolishing all laws and executive orders that give special status to intelligence employees and agents.

Written by Kit Gage, Washington representative of the National Committee Against Repressive Legislation, with James Morrell, research director, Center for International Policy in Washington.

Key Recommendations

- Ban covert operations as incompatible with constitutional democracy and world peace.
- Use public source information for analysis.
- Open the books—release budget and general program information.
- Make the history public.— release all historical files. The system is inherently contradictory and ineffective in the long term.

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