

How Fantasies Became Policy, Out of Control

The Honorable, Murderous Gentlemen of A Secret World

By ANTHONY LEWIS

It is no longer rumor, leak, fragment. A unanimous report of a Senate committee, meticulous and horrifying in its evidence, finds that American officials "initiated and participated in plots to assassinate" foreign leaders.

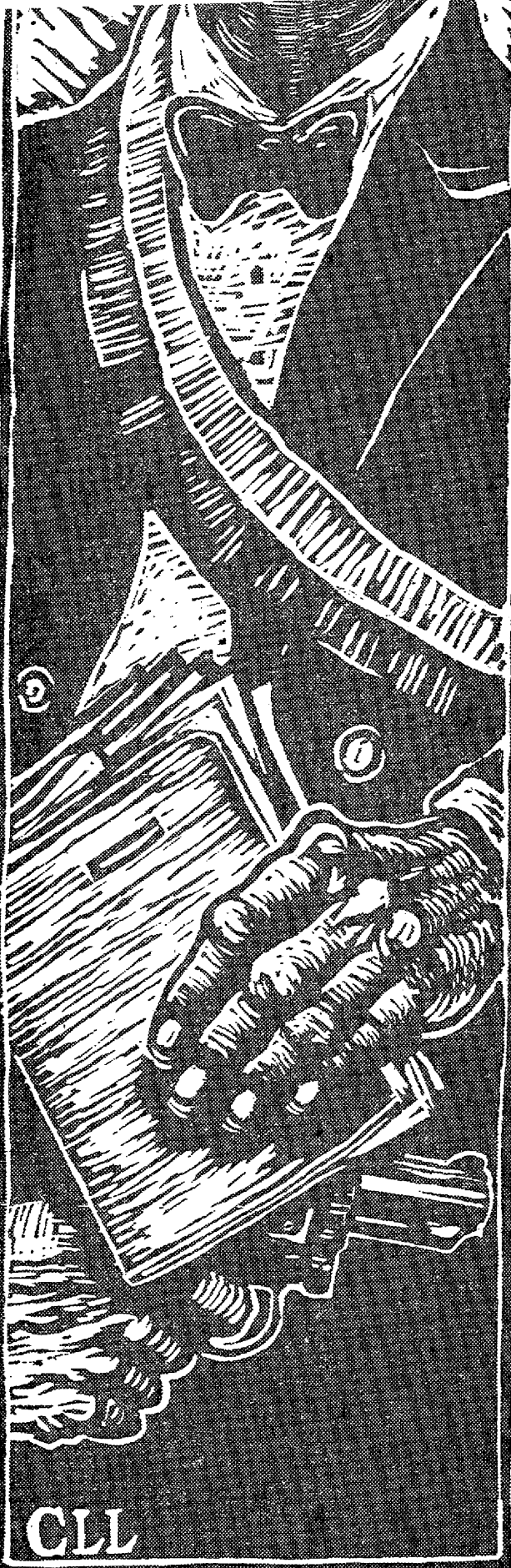
The Interim Report of the Senate Intelligence Committee is much more than the story of particular plots. It gives the public an extraordinary insight into the world of secret warfare—a view provided only in fiction before now. It describes the policy attitudes that encouraged fantasies of murder, and the mind and morals of the men who acted on them. It examines the institutional arrangements, or lack of them, that allowed the fantasies to get out of control.

One of the C.I.A.'s agents in the Congo in 1960—an "asset," in the secret language reproduced in the report—was known as WI/ROGUE. He was a stateless soldier of fortune, a forger and bank robber recommended by the C.I.A.'s Africa Division in this cable: "He is indeed aware of the precepts of right and wrong, but if he is given an assignment which may be morally wrong in the eyes of the world, but necessary because his case officer ordered him to carry it out, then it is right, and he will dutifully undertake appropriate action for its execution without pangs of conscience. In a word, he can rationalize all actions."

But such attitudes were not limited to criminal adventurers at the bottom of the ladder. The idea of assassinating Patrice Lumumba, briefly Premier of the newly-independent Congo, involved well-bred men, favorites in Washington and London society. In the summer of 1960 Richard Bissell, the C.I.A.'s Deputy Director for Plans, told Bronson Tweedy, Chief of the Africa Division, to explore the feasibility of that murder—to work out the "operational details," as Mr. Tweedy put it in testifying. The attitude went even higher up. The committee found it "clear" that Allen Dulles, the C.I.A. Director, "authorized an assassination plot" against Mr. Lumumba, and "a reasonable inference" that President Eisenhower did, too.

How did the state of mind develop? The report first mentions the international setting: the depths of the Cold War, when communism was perceived as "a monolithic enemy." At that time there was an American feeling of overwhelming power and responsibility—of hubris—though results often belied the notion that the United States could control events. Thus in 1963 Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge cabled





This illustration, and those on Pages 2, 3 and 8 are by Carlos Antonio Llerena.

from Vietnam that he could not stop a developing coup, Washington replied that it would not accept such a weak conclusion, but the coup went ahead.

Then, at various times, the very top of the United States Government developed a hysteria about particular foreign leaders—always of small countries. That was true with Mr. Lumumba in 1960. It was true of the new Kennedy Administration with Cuban Premier Fidel Castro, especially after the humiliation of the Bay of Pigs. The committee found no Presidential knowledge of murder plans. But the pressure to do something was so intense that Richard Helms, former C.I.A. Director, testified: "I believe it was the policy at the time to get rid of Castro and if killing him was one of the things to be done in this connection, that was within what was expected."

The Pressure Over Chile

The most recent example of extreme pressure from the White House involved Chile. At a White House meeting on Sept. 15, 1970, with Mr. Helms, Henry Kissinger and Attorney General John Mitchell, President Nixon ordered the C.I.A. to help organize a military coup to prevent Salvador Allende Gossens from taking office as President. Mr. Helms came away thinking that the President "wanted something done, and he didn't much care how." That was the mood at the top even though the C.I.A. had just made an intelligence report concluding that an Allende Government would not threaten vital United States interests or peace in Latin America.

As such strong feelings were conveyed from the White House, some men within the C.I.A. responded with an eagerness and ingenuity that reads, in the pages of the report, like prep school pranks. C.I.A. scientists had a plan to make Mr. Castro's beard fall out by dusting his shoes with thallium, a depilatory. High agency officers explored the idea of killing him with exploding seashells, poisoned cigars, a contaminated diving suit. On Nov. 22, 1963, a C.I.A. official offered a Cuban a poison pen for use against Mr. Castro. And there was simple bureaucratic eagerness to please. In 1961, Mr. Helms said, "We were enormously anxious to try and be successful . . . to earn our spurs with the new President."

Why was this conscienceless enthusiasm not kept under control? First, because C.I.A. officials deliberately used Aesopian language in talking to the President and others outside the agency. Mr. Helms testified that he did not want to "embarrass a President" or sit around an official table talking about "killing or murdering." The report found this "circumlocution" reprehensible, saying: "Failing to call dirty business by its rightful name may have increased the risk of dirty business being done." The committee also suggested that the system of command and control may have been deliberately ambiguous, to give Presidents a chance for "plausible denial."

Moreover, the other corrective, balancing elements in the American system were absent. Secrecy excluded Congress, most of the Executive branch and the public. Things were thought and done that would never have been proposed publicly. As an example, the committee offered the failure of Attorney General Robert Kennedy to impose an absolute prohibition when he heard about the use of Mafia figures in a plot against Mr. Castro.

In the end, these assassination plots apparently did not work. Senator Walter Mondale said that showed that "Americans are no good at killing and lying and covering up—and I'm glad that that's the case." But the techniques involved may have had their effects nonetheless. Many analysts of Watergate thought it reflected the importation of such practices back into the United States.

And the techniques may be used in any covert action, not just assassinations. Was it proper, for example, to pry against the constitutional processes of Chile? Would it have made any difference, in law or morals or statecraft, if the coup had occurred and the Chilean Army Commander been kidnapped without being killed? Those are among the larger questions that the Senate committee will now explore.

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