

Cush

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The CIA: No Cover For Failure

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Now we know why the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency and all those other spook agencies that get \$25 billion-plus from taxpayers every year can't bring down Saddam Hussein: They have not been able to use journalists or priests as part of their covert operations.

So it would seem from a quick reading of the latest make-work exercise the Washington/New York national security establishment has come up with to ride out the lean years after the Cold War. In a justification for continued massive spending on spy organizations, the experts ask us to focus on the extraneous and stupid, rather than look at the obvious.

The obvious is that an Arab dictator defeated by an international army, subjected to history's most effectively enforced economic blockade, confronted with rebellion by at least one-third of Iraq's population and denied control of a quarter of his national territory by U.S. warplanes is too tough, too brilliant or just too devious for the CIA & Co. to topple by covert means.

It is time to ask an embarrassing question: If not this task, to what task is covert action suited in this day and this world? As a matter of efficiency, any large business would look skeptically at a division failing as abjectly as the CIA has failed in Iraq for five long years and question giving the agency new resources, new powers and new authority to pursue new goals.

But that does not seem to occur to the experts on an independent task force sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations. In a report released last week, the council's independent experts went for the capillaries. Instead of fundamentally questioning the utility of covert operations in the light of the Iraq failure, the experts called—among many other things—for a reexamination of the general ban on the agency using American journalists, clergy and Peace Corps workers to carry out covert work.

The experts have created a non-answer to a non-problem. I'll let the priests and Peace Corps workers make their own cases, but here is how one journalist se-

it:
The CIA is enjoined by tradition, its rules and to some extent by law from interfering in U.S. domestic matters and influencing U.S. opinion. That creates an insurmountable hurdle for agents to use fictitious identities as journalists or to be bonafide journalists as agents. Either way, the agent-journalist would have to establish credentials by actually providing information to an American news organization or risk being spotted as a phony.

Information that is designed to go out into agency missions but that finds its way back into America is "blowback" in spook-talk—an unethical pollution of the American information stream by the agency. News organizations uphold the national interest, as well as the safety of the foreign correspondents, by opposing the CIA's

recruiting spies among their employees.

The main recommendations the task force report call for organizational changes to make the spy agencies more responsive to policymakers and preconceived policy goals. The panel's obliquely phrased call for a reexamination of the restrictions on cover for agents on clandestine operations is little more than a passing reference. But on both counts, the narrow focus the panel adopts sadly ignores the world's real problems.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States needs an intelligence community to collect and analyze national security information. That involves effective use of satellites and reconnaissance aircraft. It may mean giving off unsavory characters for tips about Boris Yeltsin's health or Slobodan Mesevic's intentions. It means bugging Muammar Gadhafi's tent.

But there is strong reason to doubt the intelligence community's ability to pull off such tricky tasks effectively while it continues to plead incompetence and inability in the case of Iraq. The spymasters ask taxpayers to pay champagne prices for secret operations while the one that everyone knows is being conducted comes on like discount beer on a flat.

Saddam is opposed by the entire international community. His army is demoralized and impoverished. Intelligence from defectors is available for the asking in Amman and other Arab capitals. And yet Saddam, like the Tigris and Euphrates, just keeps rolling along.

That is the fault of U.S. political leaders as much as of agency operatives. The fear of the unknown that kept George Bush from mounting a serious covert operation has survived under Bill Clinton. Neither White House would risk toppling Saddam for fear of sparking a breakup of Iraq. A distrust of the fragmented Iraqi opposition, led by the Iraqi National Congress (INC), also dimmed U.S. enthusiasm for a serious covert operation in Baghdad.

Both sets of fears have been grossly exaggerated. A credible, unified alternative to Saddam is taking shape, as is suggested by the recent cooperation between the INC and former key figures in Saddam's Sunni-dominated Baghdad regime. Wajiq Samarrai, an ex-intelligence general for Saddam now living in Damascus, is one example of a defector both the INC and the CIA can work with. Samarrai recalled in a telephone interview last week that he worked closely with the agency when it provided Saddam with satellite photography during the Iran-Iraq war.

The spooks and their political masters need to focus on the real cost that Saddam's continued hold on power is exacting on the intelligence community's credibility and morale at home and abroad. Chasing after phantom remedies such as journalistic or clergy cover is a wounding distraction, if not a conscious attempt to muddy the agency's record of failure in Iraq.