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The CIA's Way With Presidents

The impasse between the White House and Congress over a new charter for the CIA could well be affected by the surprising revelations of Kermit Roosevelt, a former top CIA official, who achieved fame by personally directing the covert operation that overthrew the Iranian government in 1953.

Although Roosevelt—who is Teddy Roosevelt's grandson—resigned from the CIA years ago, he has remained an intimate friend of the recently deposed shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who regained the Persian throne as a result of the CIA-engineered "revolt" against the constitutional government headed by Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh.

With the approval of the shah, Roosevelt decided to tell for the first time the inside story of the controversial coup. It will not appear in a book until next fall, but, meanwhile, some of its highlights have been made public by the Los Angeles Times in an exclusive interview with Roosevelt.

The Roosevelt account appears to be detached and objective. It ought to be useful to both the administration and congressional teams that have been trying for so long to draft new guidelines to prevent the abuses that brought the CIA into disrepute.

The chief unresolved question is whether, as many congressmen believe, the proposed CIA charter should specifically forbid such activities as the assassination of foreign leaders and the overthrow of democratic governments. The opposing view, held by the Carter administration and the intelligence agencies, is that, in effect, final discretion should be left to the president.

The chief executive would be expected to consult with the House and Senate Intelligence committees, but in 30 years there is no record of a congressional watchdog group ever preventing the CIA from doing anything it wanted to do. So, for all practical purposes, it comes down to this: Should the proposed charter include a definite set of "thou shalt nots" or just leave it all to the president?

The danger of the latter course is vividly demonstrated by Roosevelt's firsthand account of the Iranian coup, for it shows how a determined, resourceful CIA can, on the one hand, circumvent the man in the White House and, on the other hand, lure him into doing reckless things furtively that he would not dare do openly.

The Iranian coup was suggested to the CIA by the British, who felt their interests were jeopardized by Mossadegh's nationalization of oil, a step the shah himself took some years later. Plans for ousting Mossadegh were secretly developed by the CIA in the closing months of the Truman administration, but the agency deliberately kept President Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson in the dark because they were deemed sympathetic to the Iranian prime minister.

As it turned out, a State Department intelligence report in January 1953 (only recently declassified) indicated that Mossadegh's nationalization of oil had "almost universal Iranian support." It also pictured Mossadegh as strongly anti-communist and noted that the communist Tudeh Party was at odds with the prime minister and gave his overthrow "a high priority."

Nevertheless, when Dwight Eisenhower became president in 1953, the CIA scheme (dubbed "Project Ajax") was sold to him on the grounds that Mossadegh was a communist and a potential Soviet puppet. The selling was chiefly done by the new CIA director, Allen Dulles, and his brother, John Foster Dulles, the new secretary of state.

Roosevelt says Foster Dulles was so enthralled by the easy success of the Iranian operation—it only cost \$75,000 to rent the rioters—that he wanted to

repeat it in the Congo, Guatemala, Indonesia and Egypt, where he was eager to overthrow President Nasser. Roosevelt said he tried, to no avail, to convince Foster Dulles that "you just can't go around the world doing this kind of thing." Project Ajax, he felt, was a special situation.

Roosevelt finally resigned after being pressured for four years to knock over other governments, but his leaving didn't change things. In Eisenhower's last year in office, the CIA secretly started planning the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba that turned into a fiasco. After Iran and the sorry results of the CIA Guatemala intervention, he was in no hurry to act, so he passed the Cuba buck to his successor, John F. Kennedy.

To Kennedy's everlasting chagrin, he let Allen Dulles and his CIA plotters persuade him to run with it. Also, in the Johnson, Nixon and Ford years, the CIA was directing covert operations all over the globe: Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, Chile and Angola, to name a few. The record is clear: Presidents are patsies for the CIA, and at times, frankly, vice versa—something for Congress to keep in mind when, and if, it finally drafts a new CIA charter.