

CLIP

Destruction of Iran Coup Data Sparks

By John Diamond
Associated Press

After revealing that records of a 1953 CIA-backed coup in Iran were destroyed a decade later, the spy agency said yesterday it was trying to find out what other sensitive records may have been destroyed in the 1960s.

The records apparently were destroyed as part of a routine paring down of classified documents stored in CIA safes. A former member of the CIA's history staff said such document destruction continues today. But agency spokesman Mark Mansfield said the CIA no longer allows the practice.

"It was a different era and there

wasn't a requirement to keep records or a proper recognition of the historical value of such material," Mansfield said. "There is a rigorous systematic process in place now to ensure that records are retained. That simply wasn't the case 30 or 40 years ago."

Agency officials have found no evidence to indicate that destruction of the records, reported in yesterday's New York Times, took place to hide embarrassing information, Mansfield said.

Whatever the reason, the destruction of the records on Iran could not have freed up much shelf space. Mansfield described the volume of records destroyed as "minuscule" compared with the mass of material

relating to long-running clandestine operations in Guatemala. The CIA last week declassified and released 1,400 pages out of 120,000 pages of Guatemala records from agency activities in the early 1950s.

The notion that the CIA routinely destroyed records in the 1950s and 1960s points to the possibility that CIA records on other clandestine operations were destroyed.

CIA records management people are looking into what other records may have been destroyed, Mansfield said. With only about a box of records on the Iran coup surviving, the CIA is trying to piece together a history of that operation by interviewing surviving operatives.

The CIA conducted a clandestine

CIA Search for Other Missing Records

operation in Iran in 1953 to install Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlevi in power as a pro-American bulwark against communist expansion into the Mideast.

Historian Nick Cullather, who worked on the CIA's history staff in 1992 and 1993, said that until the collapse of the shah's regime in the late 1970s, the CIA operation of 1953 was regarded within the agency as a smashing success. Thus Cullather agreed with the CIA that the destruction of records in the early 1960s stemmed from bureaucratic routine rather than a desire to cover up embarrassing facts.

"Even in situations where the CIA has been successful, it's routinely destroyed the evidence of that suc-

cess," Cullather said in a telephone interview.

But Cullather, an assistant professor of history at Indiana University, challenged the CIA's assertion that destroying documents is no longer a routine part of business at the agency. When he went through training upon joining the CIA in 1992, a major portion of the instruction concerned how to destroy documents, Cullather said.

"It's a paper bag marked 'BURN' on the outside, there's a chute in CIA offices—it's just down the hall in most places, like a laundry chute," Cullather said. "You keep a burn bag by your desk. . . . Security, as it's defined in the agency, is the destruction of paper."

Cullather described a case from 1993 in which a longtime CIA field officer who had built up decades' worth of files on CIA clandestine operations in Tibet was told to destroy his files upon retirement.

"His superior hands him a pile of burn bags and says, 'Make sure you clean out your filing cabinet before you go because the new guy will need the space,'" Cullather said.

Instead, the officer, deeply opposed to destroying what he viewed as a valuable record, turned the material over to the CIA history staff.

The material became the basis for a major collection on CIA operations in Tibet that the agency says is being reviewed for declassification.