

The Washington Merry-Go-Round

Criticism of CIA Exposure Rejected

By Jack Anderson
and Les Whitten
Post 12/12/73

Spiro Agnew resurfaced the other day to warn against revoking the Central Intelligence Agency's writ to assassinate foreign VIPs. He doesn't want high level murder to get out of hand, mind you, but regards it as "an extreme option that we should keep."

At the same time, members of Congress, administration spokesmen and even some editorialists have denounced congressional committees for publicizing the CIA's homicidal intrigues. There are signs that the committees are backing off and pulling their punches.

Some of the critics oppose washing our blood-stained linen in public because it hinders intelligence gathering, complicates our relations with touchy nations whose leaders may have been on our hit list and alienates people around the world who might look askance upon government gangsterism.

Others contend that the CIA must operate at the same subterranean level as the KGB; that we must confront the Communists in the netherworld as well as the visible world; that we must give our officials secret authority to play the dirty game, trusting them to do the right thing.

The trouble with such sentiments is that they are un-American. Literally. They simply cannot be squared with four fundamental assumptions upon which the American system was constructed:

(1) Officialdom, left to itself, will tend to do wrong not right; (2) powers not rigidly limited and regularly inspected will be used against our people as well as others; (3) secret, unaccountable powers must be forbidden to government, particularly the power to commit crimes; and (4) should one branch usurp such powers, the others are duty bound to expose and restrain it.

Is it possible that, only 16 months after the Watergate climax, these homely truisms must be relearned? If so, there is need to review how the CIA got into the assassination business.

Who, for instance, gave the CIA authority to commit murder? In this land, the people are the sovereigns, and the government cannot assume powers that the people do not bestow. Any agency that operates beyond its authority, therefore, is acting illegally.

The assassination plots, like Adolf Hitler's death ovens, were carefully hidden from the people. If the Senate intelligence committee could not identify who had authorized the killing of undesirable potentates, the committee at least traced how the ugly secret finally leaked out.

We played the key role in this unraveling, which began almost nine years ago. On March 7, 1967, we reported a 1963 CIA plot to assassinate Cuba's Fidel Castro. "Our sources agree," we wrote, "that a plot against Castro definitely was taken up inside the CIA at the time Senator Robert Kennedy, D-N.Y., was riding herd on the agency for his brother."

This was the first that President Johnson had heard about it. Our story, according to the committee, "prompted Johnson to direct (CIA chief Richard) Helms to conduct an investigation."

As we poked deeper into the dark recesses of the CIA, meanwhile, we contacted John McCone, who had headed the CIA during the assassination attempts. In great alarm, he called Robert Kennedy, who asked him to set down his recollections in memo form. McCone dictated the memo on April 14, 1967.

Relates the committee: "The memorandum was prompted by a telephone call from the newspaper columnist Jack Anderson, who at that time was preparing a column on Castro assassination attempts. After talking with Anderson on the telephone, at Robert Kennedy's request, McCone dictated the April 14, 1967 memorandum, which stated . . . 'I recall a suggestion being made to liquidate top people in the Castro regime, including Castro.'"

Helms, meanwhile, assigned the CIA inspector general to conduct the investigation Johnson had requested. The subsequent report, dated May 23, 1967, confirmed a series of CIA assassination involvements.

But Helms deceived Johnson, the committee says, by giving him an abridged oral report on the earlier attempts to kill Castro, without mentioning that these efforts had continued into the Johnson presidency.

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Jack Anderson's Washington Merry-go-round — With Les Whitten

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Not until January, 1971, were we able

to learn the details of the assassination attempts. We uncovered the details of six of the eight CIA attempts on Castro's life. In a three-column series, we identified the CIA agents in charge of the project, named the Mafia confederates and described the methods used.

The Administration, the Congress and the press ignored these columns until Sen. Frank Church, D-Ida., began his investigation more than four years later. There was an understandable but unworthy reluctance to face the gruesome facts.

Many of the top officials, who should have known what was going on, insist they were unaware of the murderous conspiracies. If this is true, it was essential for the press and Congress to expose the CIA plots if only so that those in charge of the CIA could learn about them and stop them.

But if the claims of high ignorance are false and an attempt has been made to deceive the American people in perpetuity, then those Presidents and intelligence chiefs turn out to be liars or perjurers — a confirmation of the ancient warning of the Founding Fathers that a people dare not entrust secret powers to any ruler, because all rulers are corruptible by power.

America is weakened by concealment of official wrongdoing and strengthened by its exposure. The congressional committees started the investigations too late; let us hope they do not settle for too little.