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Call Off The Spies

Post 2/2/96

The one commodity never in short supply in Central America and the Caribbean is information. What the chief of the armed forces tells the president in the morning, the market women argue about in the afternoon. Yet the CIA insists it must recruit and maintain on the payroll gross and consistent violators of human rights in order to gather intelligence. In my experience, this claim is false and self-serving and merits the most intense scrutiny by congressional committees. Men like Gen. Manuel Noriega of Panama, Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martinez of Honduras, Col. Nicolas Carranza of El Salvador, Col. Julio Roberto Alperez of Guatemala and Emmanuel Constant of Haiti enjoyed profitable contractual arrangements with the CIA not because they were particularly important sources of information but because they served as paid agents of influence who promoted actions or policies favored by the CIA in that country.

These CIA policies may or may not coincide with national policy. As President Carter's ambassador to El Salvador, I was under specific instructions to do everything possible to reduce human rights violations by the Salvadoran military. In early 1980, right after the assassination of Archbishop Romero, I instructed the station chief to provide intelligence on violent right-wing leaders and their plans. I made this request in the full knowledge that the CIA station had on its payroll agents intimately linked to the death-squad violence. With the full backing of headquarters, the station chief refused on the ground that the CIA's mission lay elsewhere. This example of CIA resistance to official policy is not of mere historical interest. Last year, the capable and reform-minded CIA director, John Deutch, removed the station chief in Guatemala because he was working at cross purposes with the ambassador. And in a case that cries out for congressional investigation, the CIA pursued its own policy in Haiti even to the point of hiring a brutish thug and paying him while he persecuted and murdered the supporters of President Aristide.

The CIA has made clandestine collection of intelligence and covert action normal, routine features of U.S. foreign policy. No more certain way to undermine diplomacy and destroy trust between nations can be found. There is a role for an intelligence agency in monitoring threats of nuclear proliferation, terrorism and perhaps narcotics. Instead of concentrating on these threats, the swollen bureaucracy of the CIA has imposed huge numbers of its operatives on U.S. embassies in countries with open societies. In many overseas posts, CIA staff outnumber legitimate diplomats.

Perhaps the CIA's most successful disinform-

mation effort has been to convince presidents, congressional leaders and even CIA directors that its sources provide reliable, privileged and otherwise unobtainable intelligence. With the exception of closed states such as North Korea, Iraq and Iran, just about everything policymakers need to know can be learned or deduced from open sources. In "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy," John LeCarre has the master spy explain to his apprentice why purchased information—though spurious—gains easy acceptance at top levels of government while information gathered openly through diligent research—though accurate—is casually dismissed. "Ever bought a fake picture, Toby? The more you pay for it, the less inclined you are to doubt its authenticity."

Today there exists a near-consensus in both the legislative and executive branches and among the media and public for a reassessment of the CIA. Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan called for the agency's outright abolition. Republican as well as Democratic legislators agree on the need for profound reform.

One reform might be to select a specific region of the world—for example, Central America—as a testing place. Withdraw all CIA staff from these countries. Let the National Security Council charge our career diplomats with fulfilling Washington's intelligence requirements. Should Foreign Service officers prove capable of meeting all intelligence needs, then gradually extend this beneficial practice to other countries through pacts of reciprocal restraint by which signatories agree not to spy on or engage in covert action against the other. In order to be eligible to sign such a pact with the United States, the other nation would have to meet minimal standards of openness.

How a country is organized to conduct its foreign policy will determine to a great extent the nature of that policy. Over the past four decades, we have overfunded spying and underfunded diplomacy. As a result, the United States has too frequently departed from the path of judicious application of diplomatic influence to gain legitimate objectives. We have trampled on sovereignty, judicial equality and territorial integrity, principles that have served for centuries as norms of conduct among independent states. In the full awareness that the world is still a dangerous place, it is time to reassert these fundamental principles and give them the preeminence they deserve by setting aside covert means at least until overt measures have been tried and found wanting.

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