

The CIA and the Doctrine of 'Plausible Denial'

Since your editorials have from time to time shown recognition of the necessity for maintaining a viable and efficient intelligence organization, I was disappointed that the lavish praise you heaped on the newly issued Executive Order governing intelligence operations, in your lead editorial of Jan. 25 ["Controls on Intelligence"] contained no qualifications whatever.

I have not seen the order, but judging by press reports of its content, it would appear that the drafters were almost entirely concerned with preventing abuses and hardly concerned at all with creating a framework within which the intelligence community can function. From what I have seen of the proposed congressional drafts, they are far worse, in some instances attempting to cure a sore throat by decapitating the patient.

But apart from this, I think it is time to put the "doctrine of plausible denial" in proper perspective. Hardly anything in the intelligence context has been so widely misunderstood and distorted as this. A common perception, fostered by a report of the Church committee and by the press—including your editorial—seems to be that leaders of the intelligence community rely on such a "doctrine" to justify acting "at their own discretion," i.e., not informing appropriate officials, up to and including the president.

This is simply not so. To my knowledge, no one in the intelligence community has ever deliberately concealed

information from authorized officials, using the excuse of "plausible denial." This phrase has its origin in National Security Council directives governing the conduct of covert operations, wherein it is specified that such operations will be conducted in such a manner that the hand of the United States is not revealed, or if revealed can be plausibly denied. This merely emphasizes that covert operations must be conducted covertly, i.e., (per Webster) concealed, hidden, disguised. It requires that such operations be so designed that a denial can be made plausibly if required. It has nothing to do with intelligence or counterintelligence operations. These are secret, but not covert, and thus do not require the protection of a plausible-denial device.

It is true, as indicated above, that the Church committee, when examining some isolated cases of apparent suppression of information, concluded that this was the result of an expansion of the doctrine of plausible denial. I believe this was an unwarranted conclusion, not supported by the testing. The intelligence community may have sinned, but it so it did not, and does not, sin under the banner of plausible denial, "expanded" or not.

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